

PHILIPPE HÉRIAT

TRANSLATED



The Spoiled Children

FROM THE FRENCH BY *Gerard Hopkins*

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS · NEW YORK

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The Spoiled Children

SHE SAID:

"You may be right. I should like very much to think that you are. Perhaps rescuing this story from oblivion, and getting it down on paper, will not be a wholly pointless undertaking. In any case, I will tell it you. But I give you fair warning that I shall be completely frank, and must beg you, once and for all, not to be surprised by anything I shall say. Remember, I am not claiming to have been always right. There

are two sides to every question, and truth is never the exclusive possession of any one person."

Instead of going ahead with her narrative, she stopped and sat before me motionless and silent. I had the impression that she was actually holding her breath.

It seemed to me that she was using those few moments to free herself from certain emotions which had been exercising a restraining influence over her—modesty, an unwillingness to stir old memories, and also, that feeling which easily becomes a second nature with the lonely for whom speech is but a brief disturbance in the silent pattern of their days.

A moment later, she said again:—"All right, then, I will tell you my story." It was as though she were pretending to do what I had asked of her because it had suddenly dawned upon her that she might discover, in speaking, advantages which at first she had not foreseen, though I felt sure that what she was about to tell me had long been pondered. I remembered that, as recently as the previous evening, she had still been hesitating. Probably she had not slept a wink, but had spent the night in looking up old pictures and hoarded letters, in unpicking the winding sheet in which her former self had been laid.

I knew, also, that in the course of this same morning she had sent her little boy on a brief visit to a neighboring family of fisher-folk who were her only friends. I realized the significance of that act. By removing her son from the scene of our interview, she was making it possible for the ghost of her past to condense and to assume solidity. There was no room under the maternal roof for the young girl now dead, and the living child, to live together.

Agnès Boussardel, sitting opposite me upon her rustic terrace, nodded her head. Her strongly marked features were still those of a young woman who, as yet, showed no signs of the heaviness which comes with middle age.

She kept her eyes lowered, as though, by doing so, she could more easily assemble the facts of her story, and, at the same time, sort them in such a way as to ensure an economy and a certainty which would give the maximum effect to the remembered events of the past. I was certainly not going to be treated to a casual improvisation.

These measures, which, soon, I was to see yield to the pressure of memories, and, perhaps, of ancient grudges, could not but give an air of embarrassment to the early stages of her tale. Of this, the remarkable young woman, who was so clearly keeping a tight hold upon herself, seemed to be fully aware. Conscious that she was beating about the bush, she apologized to me, on the ground that it was difficult to begin.

"I do not intend to tell you about my childhood," she said. "I shall speak of what comes into my mind as it comes, and only insofar as it seems relevant to my purpose. When one is trying to see oneself by the light of other people's acts and thoughts, chronology is the worst of guides."

With a detachment which made it clear how much less I counted in her eyes than the shadowed world she was trying to evoke, she added, "Don't you agree?"

I said that I did. In my opinion, I told her, where narrative is concerned mere temporal succession provides, too often, a facile but deceptive method of procedure.

But she was not listening to me. The woman with whom

I had to deal would, from now on, see me only as an audience. My sole duty was not to interrupt. She had fallen victim to an impatience which would not loose its hold but, for hours together, and for many days, would keep her in a condition of feverish lucidity.

1. *The Return*

I.

IT WILL be simpler, said Agnès Boussardel, if I begin with New York, and not only with New York but with the top floor of the building on Fifth Avenue where I spent my last few hours in America. I am afraid that this opening may strike you as rather conventionally modern, but it has the advantage of clarity and accuracy. So I'm afraid I can't help myself. Besides, I had not climbed so high on that morning of departure just for the pleasure of doing

so, but in order to have my breakfast. One of the Americans' most endearing qualities is what I am tempted to call a perpetual readiness to adapt themselves to any kind of possibility. They are prepared to do what is never—or scarcely ever—done; for instance, to build houses higher than cathedrals, to sell beer and tennis balls in cans, or to satisfy a stranger who may suddenly appear on the deserted dance floor of a seventieth story, at eight o'clock in the morning, asking for breakfast.

I had been spending the week in New York and had arrived there fresh and blooming, though the Streamliner which brought me from San Francisco had traveled for three whole days at a speed which ought to have left me a nervous wreck. The subsequent forty-eight hours should have exhausted me still more, and by the end of the week I ought, by rights, to have been at my last gasp.

It had been the most excessive, the most extravagant of weeks. A mad obsession had taken hold of me as soon as I left the train, and, for a whole week, had sent me hurtling across New York from district to district, only to find myself back again, time after time, at my starting point. Every night I had stayed out until two or three in the morning but always, at eight o'clock, the same restlessness had got me out of bed in my hotel room. I wanted to see everything—a hopeless impossibility in that particular spot of the earth's surface, and even to renew acquaintance with all that I had seen already, to see again what had most surprised, moved and enchanted me. I was like a person possessed.

It seems strange to me now that my condition of mental disorder should not have given me a glimmering of what

was happening, of what was going to happen, to me. I must really have been slightly unbalanced: otherwise I should have been more cautious. Such tourist mania is, surely, not normal in one who has spent two long years in the United States, during which she had been able to think at leisure about going home, to play with the idea, constantly to postpone the fatal moment, only to see it inevitably approaching, and finally to resign herself to the prospect with no feelings of regret. Instinctively I set myself to gather the richest harvest possible of impressions and memories, as though foreseeing long years of starvation ahead. I ought to have been forewarned.

2.

AND so it was that two hours before driving down to the boat, I walked—for the distance is not great—from my hotel on Fifth Avenue to Rockefeller Center. I had been to supper several times upon its roof. At this early hour the Rainbow Room was abandoned to an army of cleaners. My appearance caused no surprise and drew from them no comment. Had I been in France, dealing with French people, how different it would all have been! Even this thought should have been a warning.

I gave my order and was directed to a bay window in a corner from which several vacuum cleaners were removed for my convenience. Only the Japanese boy, engaged in renewing the plants in an interior flower bed, did not move but continued with his work, squatting at my feet, a lithe

figure in a green linen smock. On the roof, beyond the great windows, two young men, stripped to the waist in the hot sun, were washing down the tiled terrace.

A waiter brought me a laden tray. I was left to myself. The youthful gardener paid not the slightest attention to me. The city, seen from this height, seemed to me not so much titanic as sharply geographical. It lay beneath me bathed in shadow and half lights. Central Park was already burned brown, a victim to the New York summer. Nevertheless, just at present the morning hours had laid across the whole visible surface of the town a spread of mist, a more than usually ethereal atmosphere.

I leaned my shoulder against the glass partition. Through the thin texture of my dress I was conscious of the powerful vibration which the wind, at this elevation, imparts to the higher stories. I left neglected on the table before me the bisected grapefruit and all the various dishes, ice-cold to the tongue and tasteless to the palate, on which I had been subsisting for the past two years.

After a while I went out onto the Observation Roof. I was alone there, buffeted by violent gusts. I devoted half an hour to making the round of the sheer cliff of the building. As I passed from the west side to the south, from the south to the east, a different city was presented to the view. One was bathed in light and lacked the patterning of clear perspectives; a second offered a harder distinctness in its general layout and looked like some great animal stretched at full length into the ocean; a third, furrowed like a plowed field against the light, bristled with square towers and monu-

mental obelisks. In almost every direction metallic patches of the encircling sea were visible in the distance.

I questioned the men who were washing down the terrace. They answered me with a familiar ease. I could see before my eyes their bare, stretched arms as they pointed to this or that feature of the city. I had to anchor my hat with both hands. The wind set me swaying on my feet when I turned toward the two men.

The absence of any strongly marked foreign accent in my speech caused them a good deal of surprise. The younger of the two could not believe that I was French. When I said that I was on my way to the boat he broke into expostulations. I think that I felt flattered, and must have smiled as I answered him. I spoke of my studies at the University at Berkeley. He himself had just finished his time at Columbia, having paid his way through college by working as a cleaner.

He returned to the hose and the mop, which had allowed him to cultivate his mind and body, and once again I leaned out over New York. I lingered there, though keeping a watchful eye on the time, giving myself another quarter of an hour, and then a further five minutes. It suddenly came over me that this early morning scene would be among the liveliest of my memories, and might even turn out to be one of the most important moments of my life.

When at last I made my way to the door, the two young men waved good-by and called after me, "So long! Come again!"

In the United States "Come again" has become almost a slogan. I had heard it everywhere. But this time it struck

me with peculiar force, and I stood there motionless, and somehow deeply affected, on the threshold I was about to cross. *Come again!* It was highly improbable that I should ever return to America, and still is, after so long. But . . . *Come again!*

When I was shown to my cabin, the first thing I noticed was the telegrams waiting for me on the table. They all contained the same conventional good wishes for my journey, sent by the girls I had known at Berkeley . . . a Sally, a Phyllis, a Jean. There was not a single masculine name among them.

The stewardess offered to unpack for me, and just then the telephone rang. Thinking that there must be some mistake, I motioned to the girl to answer the call.

"Somebody wishes to speak to Mademoiselle Boussardel," she said with an inquiring look, her hand over the receiver.

"I am Mademoiselle Boussardel," I said. "Who is asking for me?"

The stewardess spoke again into the instrument, and then replied, "The purser."

She held out the receiver to me. I was surprised to hear at the other end of the line an extremely sophisticated voice conveying to me the compliments of the Company. In my simplicity, I had expected to hear the voice of a ship's officer, and was nonplused to find that the owner of the voice spoke like a very gentlemanly Civil Servant. The influence of France was already asserting itself.

The purser informed me that he had been impatiently awaiting the moment when I should be settled into my

cabin. Jokingly, I congratulated him on the promptness with which he had been informed about my movements. He took the compliment seriously and assured me that the name Boussardel had caught his eye in the long passenger list.

"That will scarcely surprise you"—there was a hint of self-satisfaction in the way he spoke—"when I tell you that I am a Parisian. Your name leads me to hope that you belong to the family of Monsieur Théodore Boussardel of the Paris Stock Exchange."

I could not help smiling to myself, not so much at his ceremonious speech as at the sudden irruption of my family onto the scene. Certainly my relatives had not lost a moment. The theatre in which the drama of my return would be staged was still in darkness. It would be some time before the curtain rose, yet already, here my relations were, stepping before the footlights on the heels of their leader.

I said, "He is my uncle."

"In that case, your father must be his partner? I have the honor of knowing him, too."

The whole of this conversation had in my ears a strange, almost a foreign, sound. It was as though I were listening to someone who was not speaking my own language. This may have been because it was the first time for two years that I had heard French spoken without an accent.

I replied, "His partner?—Yes, that is my father."

At these words there was an exclamation, and the voice proceeded to offer me a better cabin. If I would be so good as to go to the Purser's Office, I could choose for myself the stateroom, among those still vacant, which would suit me best.

"If you don't mind," I said, after thanking him, "I will wait until we have sailed. I have friends with me just now."

Why did I say that? It was completely untrue. I knew very few people in New York, and the few necessary good-bys had been said on the previous evening. No one had climbed the gangplank with me. The only persons who were really dear to me in America lived on the opposite side of the continent on San Francisco Bay, or on the upper slopes of the San Bernardino Range. And I had received not even a telegram of farewell from them.

I thought of the open air and sunlight outside and went up to the boat deck, where I leaned on the rail, motionless. I was almost alone. The crowd was confined to the promenade deck, and the ship's public rooms.

I was conscious of the sense of physical exhaustion which the week just past had left in me. Sitting in the taxi which, a quarter of an hour earlier, had driven me down to the Hudson, I had made up my mind to rest quietly until luncheon. After all, I had only myself to think about. . . . And now, here I was, driven from my cabin by force of circumstance, back on the deck, with the seemingly limitless city I was about to leave before my eyes.

Actually, I could see nothing of New York. The sheds completely hid it. But in my mind I was back on the highest point of Rockefeller Center, standing with the wind and the light all about me. Other images, other memories, began to take shape. Haphazard recollections came to me of fertile valleys and burned-up deserts; of silent lakes surrounded by pine forests and high mountains; of huge stretches of rock and stunted trees which had brought to my mind tales of

the old prairie days; of motor roads on which the center line showed white on the darkest night; of the streets of San Francisco, and of terraced hillsides. I saw again the college girls who had been my friends, with their bare heads and untrammelled movements and piles of notebooks wedged under their left arms. But chiefly, I saw . . .

I waited for the strident call of the siren. It seemed to be a long time in coming, and I kept looking at my watch. I wondered whether, had it been in my power to sound that warning call, I should have hastened or retarded it. I was both impatient to hear it, and afraid.

At last the siren blared, so close that it left me, when it stopped, deafened and nervy. There was a brief interval of time. I could not have said for certain at what precise moment the ship had ceased to be motionless. I realized that we were under way only by reason of a stepped-up excitement among the friends and relations of the passengers lined along the quay. All their hands were fluttering: handkerchiefs and one or two men's hats were being waved. But I could see no tears. The mouths, shouting words which were lost in the general din, seemed happy, one and all.

Nevertheless, I was conscious of a flood of emotion which grew in intensity as I was carried past all those people so far below. When the far end of the pier came into view, and I saw the gesticulating crowd on the pier projecting over the black water, I was overwhelmed by an uprush of sensibility, of friendliness, perhaps of regret, too.

I made my way to the stern. There, in a vast glazed cage, the patrons of the Grill Room were beginning to assemble.

Luncheon was being served, but I did not feel hungry. The thoughts that were keeping me outside on the deck had taken away my appetite and made me indifferent to the occasional amused glances which some of the seated passengers directed at the young woman who seemed to be absorbed by the spectacle of New York.

And absorbed I was. We were running down the Hudson, and I could see unroll before me, in reverse, all those marvels which had so much excited me on my arrival two years before.

Once we were past the skyscrapers downtown I felt our speed increase. I kept my eyes fixed upon the irregular cliff of stone buildings which, moment by moment, was diminishing in size. One by one its details vanished. Yet, for me, the picture remained complete. It built itself up like one of those portraits of the Florentine school, in which the head of the sitter is seen against a background of countryside or city, and appears to be the incarnation of it.

I saw before my eyes, stamped, as it were, upon the distant view of a city reared above the waters, the figure of a young man. His every feature was familiar. The rather flat forehead, the black eyes, the lips curiously unindented at the corners. But the teeth were like a child's, the eyebrows soft and silky, the hair a light auburn. It was a face in which the gentleness of the Anglo-Saxon combined with a wilder Indian ancestry:

It was Norman's face.

3.

DURING the whole voyage I never slept so little as on my last night. In fact, I did not sleep at all.

The evening had seemed very long. I had established no boat-friendships. Apart from being temperamentally disinclined to indulge in casual contacts, I should, in any case, have been on my guard against letting myself get involved on this particular trip. I wanted to be left alone. I knew that five days and five nights would not give me time enough to establish the balance-sheet of my experiences. I knew, also, that in spite of my efforts I should arrive in Paris unprepared.

New York was no longer there to distract my mind, nor the fever of my last hours ashore to numb me. The laziness of a deck chair in the open had helped me to marshal my thoughts. As Europe drew nearer, old memories had begun to lay siege to me. Already they were warring with memories more recent, those of my life at Berkeley and at Big Bear Lake. What would be the issue of that struggle, what its results?

I was no longer reacting passively to the prospect of renewing old contacts. Merely embarking on the ship, merely setting foot on what was virtually French soil, had been enough to set my old self stirring within that spiritual refuge in which for two years I had been imprisoned, deprived of air and threatened with asphyxia. My natural shyness, my lack of self-confidence, all that my first weeks in America

had dissipated, all that I thought had been exorcized forever, was now coming to life again and threatening to recreate that old self from which I had thought to escape through travel. If I were not careful, the young woman who was to disembark at Le Havre would be, not the French girl who had left pleasant memories of herself in, one college, two or three clubs, and a few other places in the United States, but simply a member of the Boussardel family.

About eleven o'clock that night, I had finally settled down in the bar on the top deck. I preferred it to the other places in the ship, which were perpetually crowded. From where I sat I could see a small portion of the deck and, beyond it, a vague confusion of sea and sky.

I sat there for a long while. In the Grill Room, where dancing was going on, the American passengers were celebrating the last night of the voyage.

Well after midnight I changed my seat and settled down facing the direction in which the ship was moving. I had my back to the saloon, and was afraid that my fellow travelers might interpret my attitude as a typically French protest against the increasing lack of restraint among the celebrants.

Suddenly I gave a start. Entirely oblivious to what was happening around me, I glued my face to the window and there I stayed, my whole attention concentrated on what I had just seen in the darkness ahead and desperately wanted to see again. . . .

As soon as I was certain what it was, I turned back to the bar and felt sorry that no one was paying the slightest attention to me. I could not help laughing delightedly: my

eyes must have been shining. To whom should I impart my discovery? To the barman who was standing close to me.

"The first light!" I exclaimed, speaking automatically in English. "The first lighthouse of Europe!"

"Maybe," said the man; "it's just about due."

He had answered me in French and, to make matters worse, in the accent of Bordeaux. I felt thoroughly abashed and could only repeat, more quietly, in his own language, "The first lighthouse of Europe!"

But I felt that by the very fact of translation the words, the object, and my excitement had somehow lost the meaning they had had for me a moment before.

I went to bed, but I could not sleep. My luggage was all packed except for one suitcase. There was nothing for me to do except sleep, but sleep would not come. Too many emotions were keeping me company in the cabin. The simplest of them, those of which I was most willing to take account, were the impatience, the curiosity I felt about what I should find awaiting me.

At long last I fell into a doze from which I awoke about seven. There was daylight all about me. I ran, barefooted, to the porthole. At one and the same moment I noticed that the water was no longer moving—and saw the coast of England. The engines had stopped. We were lying idly off Southampton. The town was glittering through what remained of the morning mist. The sea had the glint of pearl, and at its edge stood houses and walls of many colors, faint yellow, muted pink, soft ochre.

How new it all looked, and how well suited to dissipate

my fancies and my fears! Why, for the past five days, had I been gorging myself upon untimely regrets when all the while *this* had been waiting for me? I stared at the shore and willingly discovered a thousand virtues in the spectacle. My first feeling was that all Europe was in this strip of coast. Through hundreds of years it had slowly adapted itself to the needs of those who had lived there. *This* country, it was obvious, had not been made in a day. Organic laws had determined the growth of the town, promoted its development, and given to it an enduring stability; the very same laws, perhaps, which had ordained that fertile soil should be piled along the age-old valleys. Between the curve of the bay and the manner in which the houses were grouped about it, between the contours of the land and the height of the buildings, between natural elements and human men and women, a sort of balance had been established far back, and was still operative.

“What harmony!” I thought. “What natural harmony!”—And it was with that thought in my mind that I lay down again. This time I really slept.

So long was my sleep that I was one of the last to go in to breakfast. But I did not hurry over the meal. Now with the coast of France almost within sight, I felt carefree. I put off my final preparations for landing. What did anything matter? The die was cast. Very soon now we should be in port. The gangplank would be run up. In five minutes at most I should feel the concrete of Le Havre beneath my feet. From that moment I should be a prey to a long succession of formalities. All I had to do was to surrender my-

self to a process which would settle me in a railway carriage, set the train moving in the direction of Paris, and finally land me on the station platform where I should find the members of the family gathered in a cluster to greet me.

So certain was I of the course of events that I could still afford to dream for a while, to collect my vagrant thoughts, to give myself one final moment's respite.

I still had to distribute the necessary tips to the restaurant staff. The evening before, I had made out the list and fixed the amounts, but not without considerable effort, for I had lost the knack of this sort of arithmetic during my stay in the United States where the conventions are very different from those obtaining in Europe. Consequently, I was more than ever tormented by the fear of giving too little, because all through the years of my young womanhood in France I had been worried and harried by scruples when it came to saying good-by to those who had given me their services.

This is the moment, I think, at which I had better give a somewhat better account of myself. I had been born, and had grown up, in a world where there had never been any lack of money, a world in which, as the result of some sort of compensating movement, money had been a slave-master. It had been the begetter of my family and was the goal which my relatives had kept constantly in view, the ideal toward which they strove. Of such relatives I have a great number. Together we form what is known as a "good, solid family." All my uncles, cousins, brothers, and my father, are either stockbrokers, bankers, notaries or solicitors. My great-grandfather, Ferdinand, who by marriage was connected with Baron Haussmann, had been a stockbroker in

the days of the Second Empire. If we look upon this ancestor as the first author of our wealth, we regard him, too, as the founder of the Boussardel dynasty. No doubt both he and my great-grandmother had had respectable forebears, but we knew nothing about them. The gulf of time had swallowed them up. We, ourselves, dated only from the first *rich* Boussardel.

His business, as well as his fortune, had stood solidly against changes of régime, wars and crises. Both had endured. Grandpapa, whom I had never known, had inherited the business from the hands of his dying father. It was now conducted jointly by my uncle and my father. My eldest brother would succeed them. If one takes into account my great-grandfather's five other children, the marriages they had made—always within their own social class—and the numerous progeny which they had produced, it should be obvious what a remarkable total of trusteeships, legal practices and private banks this long line of interconnected human beings must, by this time, have amassed.

There are families in which the males are always, by inherited tradition, *in* the Law, *in* Business, *in* the Army. The Boussardels are *in* Money.

In this way they came to form, and still do, a compact tribe with its own allegiances and its own particular form of slavery. Chance ordained that I should be born into it. Chance, too, saw to it that I should embody in my person the spirit of heresy. But I was worse than a heretic, I was a bohemian! . . . All things are relative. The fact is that, in the eyes of my family, and even before I had reached the age of reason, I appeared to be an irresponsible creature who

had no idea of the value of possessions. All the same, such purchases as I made were never made blindly and I disliked wasting money. Many a middle-class mother would have been pleased to have a daughter who was so lacking in extravagance. But I lived flattened under the weight of invidious comparisons. I was surrounded by brothers, and cousins of both sexes, who were intent on cultivating the Boussardel traditions of accountancy and economy with an ingenuity, a flair, and a concentration which amounted to genuine talent. From early childhood, spurred on by the spirit of emulation, they carried their enthusiasm to such a point that I could not but seem, in contrast to a young generation with pockets filled to the brim but perpetually sewn up, a wildly irresponsible spendthrift.

"She will run through her fortune!" my mother always said of me, even when I was but a child.

I learned, from this kind of talk, that I should one day have money of my own, a prospect which had never occurred to me and left me cold, so unreal did it seem to me then.

In this matter of expenditure I was condemned by one and all. It so happened that about this same time I one day stopped in the street to speak to a beggar. Having no small change, I gave him a two-franc piece. Any charity in which I indulged came out of my pocket money. All the same, my governess reported what I had done and I was summoned that evening into Granny's presence. She was already an old lady, and condescended less and less to open her lips. Her eldest daughter, my Aunt Emma, acted as spokesman for her on such occasions as seemed to warrant the effort.

My governess having repeated her version of the occurrence, Granny confined herself to making a gesture of invocation with both hands, raising her eyes to heaven, and sighing deeply. But my aunt launched into a lecture.

Pointing her finger at me, she ended her diatribe with the words: "There is a hole in your hand! Mark my words, if you are not careful you will end in the workhouse!"

This image had a profound effect upon me. I stared at my hand, and this made my aunt say that, in addition to everything else, I was a little fool. Back in my room, my mind still in a state of confusion, I tried to envisage my approaching end. I had a vision of myself dying on a heap of straw like Job, and with holes in my hands like Saint Francis of Assisi.

What, I wondered, would Aunt Emma have said, could she have seen me distributing my tips! I had worked them all out on a generous scale, but at the last moment, overwhelmed by a feeling of uncertainty, had increased each sum. My poor aunt, and, indeed, every single member of my family, would certainly have condemned these second thoughts of mine as a sign of quite unpardonable weakness, and certain proof that I knew nothing whatever about "life."

The waiters showed every evidence of satisfaction. They thanked me, and I replied with a few friendly words. That would also have been viewed with disapproval by the family. Time and time again my mother and my aunt had told me that I did not know how to give orders and, consequently, should never be able to run a house. For in the minds of the two sisters-in-law, all domestic problems were a matter of knowing how to give orders. By that ability alone was it

possible to "recognize a woman who is mistress in her own house."

How should I have known, when the very word "servant" revolted me? How can any young woman of the twentieth century see anything but nonsense, and even vulgarity, in the use of such phrases as "the upper classes" or "inferiors"?

Truth to tell, "inferiors" always made me feel uncomfortable. In their presence I always used to wonder what they were thinking of *me*. But though I may seem to be shy in company, I am not really a shy person at all. The dignified and the "important" have never cowed me. When, at the grand parties which she gave twice a year, my mother insisted on my making a curtsy to this or that diplomat or minister, I would talk quite naturally to the gentleman. Nor did I feel any more ill at ease with the farm hands with whom I was brought in contact during the holidays. I was often caught in conversation with tilers who had come to mend the roof of our family mansion, or with the men relaying the roadway in the Avenue Van Dyck. From the way in which both replied to my childish questions, I could feel that I was a great deal more welcome to them than were my cousins, for the latter, even when they were small, had a way of talking to them with that affectation of familiarity which reeks of condescension.

As a finishing touch I had "caught" more quickly than any French girl within the memory of my school companions that tone of camaraderie which brings the classes in America so closely together.

In the United States nobody indulges in browbeating. Was it for that reason, or because maids and waitresses who at-

tended to my wants always did so with a smile and addressed me as "honey," or because I usually looked after myself, that I lost my feeling of shyness? Whatever the reason may be, I most certainly did, during my time in America.

It came back to me, however, at the first meal I took on the French liner. Faced by a domestic servant who spoke French, I felt a vague embarrassment. It spoiled my pleasure, and I at once recognized it for what it was.

It was the headwaiter who, after I had given him his tip, returned with the news that we were almost in port.

"So soon?" I replied. "And I had so longed to be on deck when we steamed in."

I gathered up my gloves and my handbag. I glanced at the table where, during the ten meals I had taken there, no one had caused me the slightest annoyance, and at the gloomy room. The headwaiter stationed himself behind me. I rose, and he drew back my chair for the last time.

4.

THE elevator deposited me at the Information Desk. I took two steps forward; then, suddenly, stopped dead. I could scarcely believe my eyes. Before me, standing quite still in the moving crowd, was my brother. I had very nearly collided with him.

For all the five days and nights on the boat, my family had so dominated my mind, its more important elements had so constantly been my companions, that, faced by this

materialization—to use the spiritualist jargon—I was left breathless and without the power of speech.

But the materialization both breathed and spoke—in no uncertain way.

“Set your mind at rest”—and Simon gave a short bark of laughter—“I am not a ghost!”

“So I see.”

Having said this I relapsed into silence. In that single brief exchange we seemed to have said all we had to say. He certainly was no ghost, but then, I hadn’t thought he was.

I felt now that I really *was* back. The vague premonitions, the brief relapses into my old self which, from the moment of my going on board until now, had been increasing in frequency and exercising a growing pressure upon me, had come to a head in this definite threat—the sudden appearance of my brother Simon. The strangeness of his presence there, the fatuous smile to which he treated me—behind which, knowing him as I did, I could detect embarrassment—left me in no doubt that more than mere affection had brought him to Le Havre. It was as though somebody had cried “Look out!”

I foresaw an imminent tussle, and already I was on my guard. How far away those two years in America seemed to me at that moment! The sight of my brother had re-established the whole of my former life. I stood there trembling. Danger stripped away the years. I was one with my past again. I took by the hand the little girl I once had been, the child who had never remained passive under the teasing

and tormenting of her cousins and brothers, but rebellious, sometimes endowed with a spirit of wickedness which came to life only at those times.

Strangely, I found a sort of happiness in seeing myself again like that. I would not be an easy conquest. My enemies were going to have their work cut out.

I was the first to speak: "I breakfasted late: have we tied up yet?"

"Not yet: I came aboard in the pilot boat."

"That was very sweet of you!"

I raised my face a little so as to take a good look at him. I knew Simon of old. He had not always been my enemy, though he had never been my ally. Why had this egotistical creature come to meet me? I knew that he did not like putting himself out, and knew too that in no circumstances would he ever do something for nothing. It was that which most distinguished him from my younger brother Valentin who, though no less reserved, had a sweeter nature, was less intelligent, and less well equipped for getting what he wanted. As a child I had nicknamed Valentin "Simple Interest," and Simon, "Compound Interest."

He didn't lose much time in explaining his presence.

"Would you believe it? I had business to do in Le Havre one day this week—a foreign-exchange deal for one of our clients which could not be entrusted to a clerk."

"Clumsy!" I thought. "Too many details. He's lying."

"So, since I could fix my own date," he went on, "I arranged our conference for this morning so as to be here when the boat docked. In that way, I could go back in the same train with you."

"How nice," I replied, with every appearance of believing what he said.

I had had my warning. The kind thought, advanced as the prime motive of his conduct, had given me an inkling of what was in the wind. Not only was it a lie, but a lie used to conceal a serious intention. I had often been astonished by the ponderous nature of Simon's maneuvers. I had more than once found myself wondering whether anyone with his degree of intelligence would, *really* think that he could pull the wool over other people's eyes.

I looked him over from head to foot. The clothes he wore, all of the most expensive materials, were as they had always been. He was tall, and after his thirtieth year had put on weight. Still, he was good-looking in the way one sees prosperous businessmen depicted in photographs.

He replied that I certainly had changed, very much to my advantage.

"You were always keen on dieting," he said, "and I would bet you have lost a deal of flesh."

"There you are wrong. True, I've been going in for sport—a lot of it; I've developed my muscles, and my figure has improved, but I can assure you that I am no thinner."

I could not help adding: "Americans lead such a healthy life."

He was careful not to follow me onto that ground, and said, "Aren't you going to give me a kiss?"

I very nearly burst out laughing at the sight of him standing there, a smile on his lips, and his arms spread ready to receive me. He was so completely the "good sport." I presented my cheek. His arms did not close round my shoul-

ders, and his mustache scarcely brushed my face. There was no strength in his embrace, no warmth in his kiss, nothing of flesh and bone about him at all. . . . I recognized the typical Boussardel kiss, and asked, "Are Papa and Mamma well, and Valentin, and your wife, and Granny?"

He told me nothing about the health of any of them, not even of his wife, though she was pregnant, as I had learned from letters. This impending motherhood had been long and impatiently awaited, as I very well knew. But instead of speaking to me about her, Simon spoke only of the child she was to bear, or rather, of the plans they were already making for him. For the last month this hoped-for heir had been showing signs of considerable activity, and was giving every indication of being a big, healthy baby. The life of the mother was of much less account than that of a being who, though still in the womb, had already taken his place in the family as heir apparent.

Simon's whole career to date exemplified his feelings about the matter. His first wife had been the daughter of a very rich judge. She had presented him with two children and had then proceeded to die in childbirth of a third. Her death had been no great blow for my brother who had already shown that he felt a great deal more for his offspring than for his spouse. The real shock did not come until three days later, when the Will was read. With a prudence which my family never forgave, the whole of his wife's fortune had been settled in trust on the children during their minority.

But my brother turned the whole power of his mind on to the situation, and immediately concentrated his attention

on the dead woman's sister who, at that time, was very young, scarcely more, in fact, than an adolescent. Marriage was something about which she had not even begun to think, least of all marriage with Simon whom she looked upon as a brother-in-law of ripe middle age. But at this point my parents had entered the field, supported by the eloquence of my Aunt Emma and my Uncle Théodore, and Granny's weighty silences.

The Judge and his lady gave very little trouble. They surrendered almost at once. In their family, as in ours, money was loved not for what it could buy, but for the power it could give, and because it had the gift of proliferating. Under their roof, too, the first of all the Commandments was—thou shalt subdivide the hoard as little as possible, and shalt accumulate the maximum amount on the same heads—in other words, keep it in the family. That, and that alone, had been the reason which had led my mother to marry my father, her first cousin, for whom she felt not a flicker of affection.

Such an argument would probably have carried little weight with the very young bride-to-be. An appeal, therefore, was made to her feelings. It was pointed out to her that for three young children to be left motherless would be a tragic misfortune. The widower superintended the progress of the drama from the wings, and controlled the rise and fall of the curtain.

In course of time the marriage was brought off. It was celebrated in the church of Saint-Honoré-d'Eylau. When, after the ceremony, the two families filed into the sacristy, I caught an exchange of glances between my brother and

my mother which gave me food for thought later on. They were triumphant. These two allies, the strongest champions in all the family army, though they had played only a small part in the campaign, had expressed, through the medium of this wordless interchange, not only their delight at the issue but a sort of declaration of their solidarity. It had declared, almost in so many words, that she was satisfied with him, and he with her. As my mother shook hands with the guests, she could not keep from turning toward Simon, the newly wedded widower who had shown so clearly that he was her son. The conventional compliments offered seemed to me less banal than usual, for he did, indeed, deserve to be congratulated. He had recovered the sum total of his loss. He had, once again, come into money.

And now the time had come when the new brood mare was in foal, and quite normally approaching the moment of her confinement. The memory of her dead predecessor had been utterly forgotten. Her name would never again be mentioned, or not until, fifteen years from now, her children should attain their majority. They would learn then that she actually had existed. Their inheritance would give a tangible reality to that insubstantial ghost. The terms of her will would bring her once more into the lives of three young persons who, money in hand, would give her the tribute of a passing thought.

I have often played with the idea that Simon's first wife, had she lived, would have become my friend and so have saved me from being quite so lonely as I was. But that, probably, was mere delusion on my part, for she had had

far more in common with my family than with me, and it is unlikely that with the passage of time we should have drawn closer to one another. That, however, does not alter the fact that I have always been conscious of something very like resentment against her successor, that I have never been on terms of intimacy with Valentin's wife, that the dead woman has retained her position of my favorite sister-in-law.

The emotional excitement which I had expected to experience on my return to Le Havre was reduced to nothing as the result of my brother's presence. Had I been alone I should have been all agog, looking at everything, listening to everything. Instead of this, I kept a careful watch upon my brother and upon myself.

The boat-trains were ready and waiting at a lower level in the great echoing terminus. A loudspeaker was emitting popular ballads from Montmartre and soldier songs from the past war at the top of its mechanical voice. This cacophony—designed, I imagine, to give American arrivals a foretaste of the delights of "gay Paree"—had a very different effect on me. It merely presented me with one more disappointment and served as my introduction into an only too real world.

We sauntered up and down before the waiting coaches. Simon explained that in order to be sure of my company he had had to reserve two seats in the last train. The others were already filled to capacity with people from the boat. I had to give up my ticket. These formalities brought home to me even more forcibly than before just to what extent my

brother had put himself out, and just how odd it was that he should have done so. When, I wondered, should I be told what it was all about?

"It will mean a delay of half an hour," said Simon.

"So be it," I answered. "Between an absence of two years and two years, thirty minutes, there is not much to choose. . . . Only, don't you think we ought to telephone the family to say we shall be late? There is no point in Mamma and Papa getting to the station half an hour too soon and looking for us in the first two trains."

"But Agnès . . ." said Simon.

He left the sentence unfinished. We had come to a halt and stood staring at one another, he open-mouthed, astonished, and I astonished no less. Both of us were off our guard. But almost at once my astonishment turned to impatience, and instinctively a note of provocation crept into my voice.

"Well, go on . . . what were you going to say?"

My brother swallowed: "You're not imagining that any of the family will be there to meet you?"

I said nothing, and he took advantage of my silence as though it had been a crack through which he could slip. He was on my side. That would best suit his purpose, though what that purpose was I still did not know. He even gave me to understand that he did not wholly approve of the family's attitude.

"You know them as well as I do; you know what they're like."

The lack of respect of that "they," made it perfectly clear

what was in my brother's mind. I still said nothing, and he went on playing his little game.

"Did you think they were going to fall on your neck?"

"Ah," I said slowly, "I see what you're getting at . . . they're in a disapproving mood, are they?"

"Hang it all—don't forget what's happened!"

I felt quite sure that he had not forgotten. I was about to hear an excellent summation of the situation as seen by the family.

"Well, I mean . . . you went off for a two months' stay with a family in San Francisco. When the two months were over, you sent word home that you had entered your name on the books of the University at Berkeley. A year went by, and you extended your period of study. Not for a moment did you discuss your plans with them. Their opposition was no more than a formality because, with you, one knows that anything may happen."

The third person plural had now been transformed into the collective.

"And because"—I made no bones about it—"it so happened that I was of age."

"Yes, that point *was* made."

From what he had just told me, I gathered that they had played with the idea of issuing an ultimatum but had realized that I should ignore it.

"The fact remains," Simon went on, "that the whole business was a bit mysterious. For instance, you let a whole month go by without writing."

"You had not answered my previous letters."

"Put yourself in their place. What sort of a figure did *they* cut?"

"Oh, if you're going to drag in wounded pride . . ."

"It wasn't merely a question of wounded pride, my dear girl"—Simon was warming up—"as is proved by the fact that, even if you didn't get any letters, money was paid in regularly to your account. You didn't want for anything."

"That's not the point."

"Well, but you only had to . . ." he seemed to find it difficult to get the word out, "you only had to . . . insist. You've got money of your own, I know that, but they've so arranged things that you can't touch the capital. What I mean is . . . they've really been very patient, even when they were very uneasy."

I raised my voice: "Let's face it, Simon: what I do and what I think has never mattered two straws to either Mamma or Papa. I could give you examples of what I mean at many different periods of my life. If I don't, it is because I think it would be bad taste on my part, and, also, quite pointless."

"Don't lose your temper," said my brother. For a moment or two he said no more. Obviously he felt himself on slippery ground. I had not lost my touch.

Simon knew that I was perfectly capable of reminding him in whose interest it was that I had been expelled from the hearts of my nearest relatives. On this point there was nothing I could tell him that he did not know already. He knew as well as I did what my parents were really like: a father so colorless, apart from business, that he seemed to be always under his wife's thumb, thinking and feeling only

through her; a mother who cared for nothing in the world except her two sons. Was it not Simon himself who had exploited this passion of hers to the limits of the abnormal? Her woman's heart had been so long frustrated that passion was possible for her only through the medium of her boys.

This mother of mine, so heavy in appearance, so devious, had finally become her own victim. Who could say whether my brother had not teased out, as I had done, all those other ambiguous motives, as a result of which, indifference where I was concerned had changed into animosity and aversion?

In this matter of my parents, no clarification, however oblique, could have settled matters.

He continued calmly: "I am only trying to explain to you why it is that you will find nobody at the station. At the family dinner this evening, you will slip back into your place as though nothing had happened. All the same, there will be nobody to meet you."

I had forgotten all about the "little family party." It was a weekly occasion at which everybody complained or laughed, but from which nobody would have been absent for an empire: a gathering of from fifteen to eighteen persons bound to one another by jealousy and mistrust, but all brought together, too—it is only fair to admit—by the pride they felt in being of the Boussardel clan. I had always much preferred the full-dress family banquet which took place only six times a year to these parties. It had, on one occasion, involved three separate tables, one for the older people in the dining room, one for the younger folk in the big drawing room, and one for the children in the gallery—forty-eight guests in all.

So I had come back, had I, just in time to take my place and be the object of disapproval—a silly weapon that had been used against me all through the days of my youth? It had never had the slightest effect on me, whereas four words of rational or genuinely affectionate comment would so easily have overcome my rebelliousness. But for those words to be uttered there would have to have been a simplicity of heart and behavior which neither my mother, my aunt, nor Granny could ever have simulated.

Simon and I had resumed our walking up and down. These memories had awakened in me a mood of childish petulance. A whole gallery of pictures opened before me, recalling all that I had been subjected to in my young years: meals at which, by tacit consent, nobody had addressed a word to me; tea parties, children's parties, and dances from which I had been excluded. I saw again, in retrospect, mocking brothers, whispering cousins, aunts stiff with sovereign disapproval, parents and grandparents with Olympian thunder in their looks. I felt again my despairing obstinacies, morose delights, and a sense of solitude in that house full of guilt, rich carpets and opulence, but empty, for me, of any beloved presence. For even my nurses had been instructed not to address a word to me, and the kitchenmaid told to shut the cats away in the cellar, since in them I might have found consolation.

"I'm going to be disapproved of"—so ran my thoughts—"though I am twenty-six years old and have just come back to them after a long absence." Simon kept his eyes fixed on me all the time we were engaged in sauntering. I was fully conscious of that, and it brought the situation back into my

consciousness. I said: "But *you* don't disapprove, do you? Obviously you don't, or you wouldn't have come to meet me."

"Oh, I! Surely you know that, at bottom, I'm a tolerant chap?"

I uttered no protest but he acted as though I had, in an effort to reduce his uneasiness. He assumed the air of a bluff, straightforward companion whose good faith could not be questioned.

"I suppose you remember having once heard me say that you were being allowed too much freedom—is that what's bothering you? Be fair; did I ever suggest that they ought to hold you on a tight rein?"

That was true. He had been too clever to commit the mistake of making an enemy of me. I was the one undisciplined member of the family, but also the only one who could display either courage or obstinacy. Open hostility between us would merely have led to complications which would have injured both, whereas a tacit but vigilant neutrality was obviously advantageous to both.

"Good," I said, as though reaching a sudden decision, "good; if I am right about you, Simon, you understand me pretty well—eh?"

It had been obvious to me that he was putting off the moment when he would have to unmask his batteries, and I was trying to bring matters to a head.

"Yes," said my brother. "I will be frank and admit that, up to a certain point, I do understand you."

"And what precisely is it, Simon, that troubles you now?"

He was less embarrassed than I had thought he would be.

He came out with his answer as though he had had the words all cut and dried in his mind.

"I understand your wish to see something of the world. I understand your having stayed on in the United States because the American way of life attracted you. You have always had a modern outlook, and there was much to please you in such a land of skyscrapers, feverish activity, and the struggle for life."

"What a very odd idea you have of America!"

He continued, without a break. "Of violent pleasures, motor trips and temporary attachments . . ."

There could be no doubt about it: Simon's mind was filled with all the conventional ideas.

". . . of irresponsible marriages."

There he stopped. I gripped his arm. I forced him to a standstill and made him look me in the face. I felt a terrible desire to laugh.

"Oh, dear!" I said. "So *that's* it!"

"What do you mean?" He put on a very convincing show of innocence.

Compressing my lips, I stared at my brother, putting off the moment when I should laugh in his face. I confess that I was thoroughly enjoying myself. It was really too good to be true! *This* was what had so disturbed my family that they had felt compelled to choose from among themselves a plenipotentiary charged with the duty of finding out, on the very landing-stage, in what condition the prodigal daughter had returned!

They suspected me of being married! At the thought of the family discussions to which my prolonged absence had

given rise—of all the explanations except the right one, my desire for freedom, which had been put forward; at the thought that my mother, or rather my Aunt Emma, had one day suddenly exclaimed, striking the table with the flat of her hand, “What if she’s got herself married!” and one of the others had almost certainly added that it was a perfectly ordinary thing, in the United States, for young people to get married without the consent of their parents; at the thought that they had visualized, as a son-in-law, some *self-made* man, an American Jew perhaps, or a cowboy, somebody, in any case, who was perfectly capable of laying his hands on the family fortune; at the thought of the problems, the fears, the resentment to which the idea of my marriage must have given rise—a malicious feeling of joy broke loose within me and I gave way to a long fit of laughing.

I could see from my brother’s expression that he wanted me to think that he was completely at sea. But that was a trick on his part. He did not mind looking a fool if, by so doing, he could acquire valuable information. He said, “Have I said something stupid?”

My laughter broke off short. The comic element in the situation no longer appealed to me. I caught a glimpse of the other side of the medal.

“Stop talking,” I said in a colorless voice, “it’s all too squalid.”

“Still, you must admit—”

I cut him short: “Oh, I know what you’re going to say. That would have explained everything. That is what would have happened in the case of an American, therefore it might have happened in the case of a girl who had been

living as an American for two years. . . . No doubt you'll tell me that my whole attitude justified any assumption."

"The fact is that some of your letters, if one read between the lines, made it quite clear that some sort of a change had taken place in you."

But I would not listen to him. "It's my turn now, Simon, to do the talking. What I hold against you, is that among a great many possible explanations of my behavior you picked on one, and one only. It never, I suppose, occurred to you that, quite simply, I might be happy? I suppose you thought that that was not a sufficient explanation of my not wanting to leave America, of the unrevealing nature of my letters. You couldn't see that far. The only hypothesis you clung to was that I had gone and got myself married, because marriage is something that touched you all closely and might damage your interests. How very Boussardel it all is!"

But Simon was not going to let himself show annoyance yet. With an air of quiet reasonableness he said, "So you guessed that the question might arise?"

"No, strange though it may seem to you, I did *not* guess anything of the sort. I suppose I just don't know my charming family quite as well as I thought I did. Certainly I realized that you had not come to meet me out of pure affection, nor that you had come to Le Havre simply on a matter of foreign-exchange business. . . ."

My voice was trembling. Anger was welling up in me. "But not for a second did I believe that my own brother had been commissioned to verify the unsullied condition of my status"—I stamped my foot—"or of my underlinen!"

"What it comes to," said Simon, unwilling to let himself

be sidetracked, "is that you have been accused of a crime of which you are innocent—am I right?"

My anger, my disappointment, my outraged modesty—none of these things mattered to him. He simply wanted to know!

"I shan't say another word: I shall tell you nothing!"

The temptation was irresistible. I would leave them in ignorance, would turn their own weapons against them. They had put them into my hand of their own accord. So much the worse for them!

But I am doing myself an injustice. In saying no more I was obeying the prompting of a very secret, a very feminine feeling. I was thinking of Norman.

It was my oaf of a brother who was to blame. I was no longer concerned about myself. Had nobody else been involved I should merely have regarded my family and their selfish fears as a bad joke. But with the thought of Norman within me, I leapt to my own defense, to *our* defense. Memory was a great deal more sensitive in me than a sense of dignity.

The expression of my face must have changed. With a gesture that was instinctive rather than deliberate, I took my fur from my brother's arm and put it over my shoulders, wrapping it about me, fastening it tightly around my throat.

As I climbed onto the running board I suddenly felt very tired.

5.

NO sooner had I settled into my seat than I became completely unaware of both time and place. I leaned back with my head in the corner and turned up the collar of my fur, the better to achieve isolation. After a while I closed my eyes. At once, I had an inner sense of sunlight, space and air. Every detail of what actually surrounded me vanished. The noise of the train, the blare of the loudspeaker, could torment ears other than mine. They merged, for me, into the sound of a students' chorus, and this in turn grew muted in the fabulous silence of the great mountains and of the lake where once I had lived.

The brutal shock of this evocation made me wince. But I met its onset with nothing more effective than listlessness. I scarcely retained sufficient sense of my whereabouts to be conscious that though Le Havre, the station, Simon, and my waiting family had been effaced from my mind and wholly dissolved, what remained was precisely the truth which Simon and my relations so much desired to know. They had not been made free of my secret: all they had done was to send me back to it.

Norman . . . the first time I had seen him . . . how could I identify the day, where discover it again? About that first time I could say nothing.

Norman remembered having met me quite by accident when I first arrived at Berkeley, ill at ease, and not yet acclimatized to my new surroundings.

"You were walking," he told me later, "with a very superior look on your face. I thought to myself, What a snob!"

When I explained to him that my seeming arrogance was no more than a sort of self-defense due to my shyness, he would not believe me. He had never thought of me as a shy person. Perhaps I never was so long as he and I were together. I have often thought since that it was he who blew away my painful self-consciousness and timidity.

"On that occasion," he went on, "you strode past without so much as a glance at me."

It was a long time before I noticed him. We were attending some of the same lectures, but to me he was just one among all the other boys in the class. When what I secretly think of as the Monterey night came, and I did at last meet him, I realized that his face was familiar—but from where?

And so I met this young man with whom I was to know a love which, though incomplete and disillusioning, was, all the same, my only love. He was the very symbol and image of a period in my life which had been too little restricted, of an existence which had been too simply physical; and when at last he vanished with so light a tread, the day on which he had first come into my life ceased altogether to be real.

Were it not for the fact that the memory of his place in my past has come to life again in my son, and with each

passing day grows and grows, I might be tempted to believe that he was no more than a mirage, a creature born of illusion.

Seated beside my brother, who had fallen silent, and carried by the now moving train toward my waiting family, I lived again in retrospect the early days of my time at Berkeley.

There had certainly been no thought of love in my mind when I arrived there. How could I have foreseen that love was waiting for me in that university not far from San Francisco. A love, too, which was so very different from any love of which, till then, I had dreamed? I had been in the United States a bare two months and was staying on under the pretext of perfecting my English. This extremely unsatisfactory excuse, which might have sounded more plausible if I had suggested settling for a while in Oxford or Cambridge, could not, I now realize, have deceived anybody. My decision was transmitted by cable, and whether or not it would worry my family was a matter of no concern to me. In fact, the idea that it might do so was not altogether unpleasing. The plans to marry me off in which, all the preceding winter, my mother and my aunt had been dabbling with a relentless energy of which I was still in ignorance, the injunctions and threats with which I had been assailed, had reduced me to the state of a nervous wreck. The tyranny which was the habitual weapon employed in my family could produce only extreme results, and only two types of individual: the submissive and the rebellious. My brothers, and my cousins of both sexes—all endowed with

varying degrees of apathy or hypocrisy—composed the first. Of the second, I, alas, was the only representative.

In short, I had gone to San Francisco in search of peace, and I was still looking for it when I moved to Berkeley. It was the only pleasure I wanted or expected. It is only fair to add that at the University, and in the sorority house where I lived, those of my companions—and they were fairly numerous—who had chosen loose living, retained in their debauchery a degree of cold lucidity which couldn't have been less infectious. There was no disorder in their disorderly lives. They gave themselves freely, but there was no abandonment in their giving. Their example was far from tempting.

The boys, as a matter of fact, never made a pass at me, or if they did, it was only as a matter of common habit. My attitude entirely upset their notions of ethnographic fitness, seeing that I, a French girl, showed myself to be a far less easy prey than the females of their own nationality. I had many friends, but none with whom I indulged in the pastime of flirtation. The "foreignness" of my conversation appealed a great deal less to the young men than to the more earnest and bespectacled of the girl students. Thus I was neither excessively popular nor excessively the reverse.

This middle course satisfied my need for tranquillity. It also satisfied my thirst for change, the longing I felt to lose myself in a society which was so very different from the one of which I had grown heartily sick. In Europe I had long dreamed of the "flat level of American life." It would, I thought, bring me many delights. Nor did I have far to look for these. They came unsought. For the first time in my life

I no longer felt at odds with my surroundings. Never, in all the years of my youth, had my heart and spirit known such a holiday, the only holiday worthy of the name that I have ever enjoyed.

Such was my state of mind until December. It was the first winter I had spent in this latitude, and I found it difficult to recognize the season. Well sheltered in our Bay of San Francisco, we reveled in warm air, warm sunshine, and even in the warm rain which had never a trace of harshness. I felt myself to be infinitely removed from the mud and cold of Paris. The Boussardel mansion, which overlooked the Parc Monceau, at this time of the year, soggy and damp, withdrew into a remoteness of mists and memories.

Christmas was approaching. My companions were all agog with anticipation of pleasures to come. Party followed party. My sorority, one of the smartest in Berkeley, gave a ball. With that mixture of ceremony and childishness which had so much amused me when I was new to the University, the various introductions were carried through.

After this, there was dancing. I, personally, danced very little. The other members of my sorority, all somewhat snobbish, assumed a manner of ultra-refinement which did not, however, prevent them from dancing in that style peculiar to American girls, a style I never succeeded in mastering. Besides, the certainty for any young American male that no dance could end without degenerating into something else, even though he might not want it to, made him relegate this particular ball to the level of "kids' stuff," unworthy of a grown man.

After midnight the freshmen and other newcomers dis-

creetly withdrew. Only the most popular were pressed to stay as the dancing went on. I did not go up to my room, knowing that the music would make sleep impossible. The fun began to wane, as it always does, and there was much discussion about how best to end the evening. The idea which was received with the greatest show of approval was that we should all make a moonlight trip to Monterey. Monterey, over a hundred miles from Berkeley, stands on the Pacific shore, and, more than most places in that part of the country, has a character of its own.

I knew exactly what trips of that kind meant. I had already seen, on clear nights, whole strings of cars standing wheel to wheel, all their lights, excepting the rear one, extinguished, and facing a view in which their occupants were taking not the slightest interest.

No sooner was the plan agreed upon than the party formed itself into couples. In a moment they would all be off, leaving the house to silence, and I could go back to my room. It was not necessary for me to refuse an invitation, for none was extended to me. Or so I thought; but I was wrong. A young man whom I knew by sight asked whether I would go with him in his car. The mistake he was making caused me no little amusement. If I accepted, he would be sadly disappointed.

So I said, "Can't you find anybody else?"

"Why do you say that?" he replied.

I felt sorry for what I had said. My words were without any kind of justification, seeing that arrangements were still being made all around us and there were plenty of girls to choose from.

"I am feeling rather tired," I said, by way of explanation.

"Is that so? I'm terribly sorry."

As is the custom in America, he did not insist. On the spur of the moment I bit my lips, and plunged: "That is to say . . ."

Then I looked at him. Character and wildness showed equally in his face, and I stared hard in an attempt to interpret this strange mixture. From the way I was looking at him, the young man doubtless thought that I was trying to find out who he was, for he proceeded to introduce himself.

"My name's Kellog, Norman Kellog." And then, before I could answer, "I know yours," he said.

He pronounced it in the American fashion—*Ag'niss*. This seemed to give it, and perhaps myself, an entirely new significance. What surprises had this new Agnès in store for her?

Suddenly an odd feeling took hold of me—a feeling I had never known before. I had just seen his hands. There was nothing markedly individual about them. They were neither very long, nor very slender, nor very muscular. Yet for me, at least, they had a curious appeal. I felt that I was blushing. I wanted to be touched by them. At the same time I realized how ridiculous it would be just to shake hands and so finish the evening.

He repeated, "I'm terribly sorry," and took a step backwards.

"There is really no need for you to be," I said in a sudden rush of words. "I shall be very pleased to accept your invitation."

At that he laughed. My eyes turned to his face, and I felt

another shock. I had caught sight of his teeth. They were short, like those of a child, and his smile, though his face was that of a young man, was a child's.

Once past San Jose, the procession began to thin out. It must have contained about twenty cars. One, carrying a more than usually impatient couple, had already turned off into a wooded byroad to the accompaniment of motor horns and shouts from those who were still keeping to the highway. Suddenly, a train overtook us, roaring along the top of an embankment which fell sheer to ground level on our right. The purposefulness of the great illuminated train, and the noise it made in the darkness, stimulated some of the drivers to indulge in a race which filled me with alarm. To my surprise it ended without mishap.

Also to my surprise, my companion had taken no part in it. "It's too lovely a night for speeding," he said, a statement which seemed to me to be not a little remarkable.

Yet I said to myself, "When we get to Monterey, he will behave just like the others. He will slip an arm around me and grip my shoulder with his right hand. In a second or so I shall feel the warmth of his palm through my coat. What shall I do to free myself, to stop him, to undeceive him? Why in the world did I come? I have no intention of letting this young man kiss me, still less of letting his hands explore my breasts and my knees. . . ."

In order to find some justification for these visual images of what I might expect, I forced myself to remember certain scenes on which I had stumbled by chance, in which my companions had been caught behaving with utter abandonment. To myself I said, "It is perfectly true that, in the

United States, out of a hundred college girls, less than twenty are virgins. There is nothing slanderous in that statement, the Americans themselves would agree. The boys, of course, have to bear some part of the blame, but if their girl friends tolerate such liberties, and even invite them, how can one condemn them? It would be easy enough, certainly, for me to control this Norman and make him behave sensibly. The fear of consequences and, more simply, of the police patrol, is never wholly absent from the minds of these bareheaded Don Juans. Still, I have put myself in a very awkward position. Either I must go back on what this young man has probably taken for tacit consent, or I must submit to caresses which I most certainly do not desire. Isn't there, perhaps, some half and half measure which will help me out of this jam? Fortunately, this particular young man had as yet shown no sign of bestial crudity! . . . Perhaps it might not be altogether unpleasant . . ."

If I ever felt the insidious touch of temptation, it was on that night, on that road, in that car. . . .

At the edge of a level piece of ground overlooking the sea, the cars were parked in a long line, their noses turned waterwards as though ranged for the take-off of a race into the infinite on which they would never start. Nobody got out. Through lowered windows questions were asked and answered, friends recognized friends, and a few flasks passed from hand to hand. The radios had all been left on and were emitting a confused bedlam which raised a number of protests, with the result that the various sets at last concentrated on the same Hawaiian tunes which, apparently,

were the traditional background music for these occasions.

The deep waters of the Pacific stirred in the moonlight. Great rollers, piling up far out, swept toward the land, and then, since the beach below was hidden from our sight, broke invisibly. We heard them battering the shore. The Hawaiian songs were turned low. Headlights were extinguished. Laughter lessened.

I sat waiting for the first expected movement to be made by my companion. When it came, it was not what I had thought it would be. He hoisted himself up slightly in his seat, pulled an old cushion from beneath it, and casually offered it.

"You'll be more comfortable with this," he said.

He settled me against the side of the car in such a way that there was a space between us. Then he crossed his two hands on the wheel. I realized that he was not going to try any nonsense. Once my first surprise had passed, I was conscious of an emotional thrill. This gesture of his, or rather, this absence of the expected gesture, flattered me. I felt slightly confused as I remembered how I had thought him capable of taking liberties, and had actually prepared myself to counter them. Certain that my words would not be misinterpreted, I said, "You're nice. I'm glad I came."

He turned his face to mine, smiled in the dim light, and answered, "I'm glad, too."

The smell of the sea reached us, and I found it less acrid than I had expected. It occurred to me that our drive had taken us some distance to the south, that the great valleys with their wealth of fruit trees must be close at hand, that

another five hundred miles would bring us to Mexico. Somewhere, immediately facing us, lay Japan and China. I was far from home, but I was not alone.

I got my friend talking. He was finishing his last year at Berkeley. His special subject was architecture. Already, during the last vacation, he had acted as assistant to a designer of bungalows and cabins in the mountains.

His family was Scottish: but there was Indian blood in him. It came from a Cherokee grandmother whom his grandfather had married in Oklahoma, in the old frontier days. When he spoke of this part of his heritage, a note of pride came into his voice. He knew that these particular racial characteristics had taken on fresh life in him, whereas in his sisters, the Anglo-Saxon fairness predominated. He said that he found life in cities oppressive, but that in the wide spaces of the prairie, or among the age-old pines, he was conscious of his blood. The best holidays he had ever known were those he had spent in the Yosemite during the previous summer, with the architect about whom he had told me.

As I listened I felt amazed to think that I had not sooner distinguished him among his companions. "But that's nonsense," I thought. "I did notice him, and I did speak to him."

To cut a long story short, after that evening he took priority for me over all the other men, and over the greater part of my memories and hopes.

On our way home we stopped in Oakland, just short of Berkeley. I think that neither of us could face the prospect of returning to the small world of the University. We sat

side by side in a drugstore warming ourselves on rather bad coffee. It was close to dawn. Outside, the first sounds and activities of the day were beginning. I looked at myself in a glass. I was afraid that this night without sleep would have left my features drawn, my complexion faded. But I was pleasantly surprised. My image assured me that I was, I won't say pretty, but at least adequately good looking. When we left, I faced the brightening day with confidence.

It was not until the moment came for my friend to leave me that I realized that as yet our hands had not touched. I now held out both of mine to Norman. He smiled at what must have been to him a most unusual gesture. All the same, he responded to it with the offer of his own. The pressure was brief, but I felt again within me the same disturbance which had surprised me the previous evening. At last I had found the warmth which my heart craved, and my life.

Norman said, "I'll see you later."

I replied, "Of course, and thank you for a lovely time."

To this he replied, stressing the last word, "Thank *you*."

The flattest of interchanges, the most time-worn of American turns of speech. But, in his mouth and in mine, they seemed to have a unique value: *see you later . . . of course . . . thank you . . .* The sound of those words sets me trembling still, after all these years.

The people in San Francisco with whom I had lived for my first two months in America invited me to spend Christmas with them. One of their daughters, who had married an army officer, lived in a charming house in the Presidio. On the very outskirts of a city which, though certainly less

cyclopean than New York, was rich in even wilder contrasts, this part of the town produced the paradoxical effect of being a city within a city, a pleasure city within a city of chaos. I have been often told that most European visitors to San Francisco utter the same delighted cries on seeing the Presidio for the first time, and declare that they would like to live there.

I could take my choice. Either I could spend Christmas with the young married pair, who were gay, cultivated and very sociable, or I could go with the other daughter and her parents to Arizona, where the younger boy was under treatment for his lungs. All the members of the family free to make the trip were planning to spend Christmas and the New Year with him. I chose to go, under the pretext that the idea of Arizona attracted me.

But what really attracted me was the thought of getting away. Like all human beings whose feelings have been long pent up and are suddenly offered the promise of happiness, I felt overwhelmed by what had occurred. What I wanted just then was the most commonplace thing imaginable—to put a few hundred miles between myself and Norman, just to recover my mental balance.

Perhaps, too, deep within myself my old morose demons were awake and watching. Perhaps they were whispering to me: "Really now, you have known him for precisely two weeks, and already, in that short time, you have learned his faults: his egotism, his incapacity for suffering, his love of life in its day to day aspects, his excessive ingenuousness. You know perfectly well he is neither healthier nor better-looking than all the other boys, though perhaps a shade less

‘standardized,’ thanks to the oddity of his features. Go off somewhere. Don’t see him for a while. Then, come back. You will find that his face is no longer mysterious.”

But what determined my departure was self-doubt, the long habit to which I had grown accustomed of never finding my happiness in other people. I had so often felt like those people whose bodies are seamed with old scars and who, at the least change in the weather, are conscious that their “old wounds bleed anew.” But none of my scars were due to wounds, for no one had ever dealt me any that went deep. Those I showed were but the marks of my repeated feeding upon myself.

So off I went, if not with the hope, at least with the possible prospect, of forgetting all about Norman.

By the time I returned I was deeply in love. Separation had ripened me like fruit upon the tree. And now, here I was, about to see his face again, to hear his voice. But he would not be the same Norman as the one I had set upon a pedestal. . . . How very simple-minded I was!

I saw him again. He said that the time had seemed long to him. I drank in this extraordinary piece of news.

On the very evening of my return he took me out—where to, I have no idea. The rain was falling in a curtain around the car. He pulled up, and then, for the first time, he kissed me.

Every night, from that moment, I went to sleep impatient for the morning. I gave up any attempt to write letters home. I was with Norman all the time. I no longer knew what day of the week it was. I, who had lived in a succession of lectures, music lessons, daydreaming, and the delights of

solitude, now learned that I could exist on air, on the thought of the next day, in the immediate present. I discovered that there was no evil spell upon my life, that within myself there were no dark obscurities, no strange mysteries. I found that I was credulous, silly, easily taken in. I sometimes said to myself, "You had too high an opinion of yourself, my girl!"

Norman's last year as a student ended in the late spring. He had an offer of a job. The same architect for whom he had already worked, asked for him again. There was a plan afoot to start a new winter-sports center farther to the south, in the San Bernardino Mountains. A whole agglomeration of bungalows and cabins, a regular camp, in fact, would have to be constructed on Big Bear Lake. The assistant architect would have a great deal of responsibility, and much important work. He would be well paid, and would be given free living quarters.

"But I'm not accepting," said Norman. "I'd rather see you every day."

I replied with the simplicity which I had acquired only quite recently: "Norman, you must learn to be practical. Why shouldn't you combine both? Why shouldn't you take me with you?"

He was not, after all, so like the other boys, as was evidenced by the fact that he uttered no protest. He received my suggestion in complete silence. Whenever he thought about anything very intently, his face assumed a solemn, enigmatic look which I liked to think was the masklike expression of his true race.

"It might be managed," he said after a few moments. He

had weighed the pros and cons of the situation. "The place must be pretty much of a desert, and there won't be any gossiping. Besides, so far as the locals are concerned, we shall be merely foreigners. They'll just think we're married."

He gave me a smile, and added that his boss was not an inquisitive type. I listened, won over in advance.

He had not yet possessed me.

2. *The Family*

I.

FROM that moment, a new chapter opened in my life. How true that was I did not realize until fifteen months later in the train between Le Havre and Paris. But then, I could not think beyond the point at which I have just stopped. Having reached that stage in my memories, I had to call a halt to give myself a breathing space before continuing my backward journey. And so it was that I returned to the present, to the special train, to my brother. The new

resting place on my pilgrimage was called, not Big Bear Lake, but Maisons Laffitte.

That is how life is—a constant overlapping. Into our new sensations are introduced sensations of an earlier date, and the thoughts that have come to us after the event. We imitate those Italian architects of the Renaissance who used in their new constructions stones filched from old Roman arenas.

I remained wrapped in my fur, as much to warm my memory as to hide from Simon who was seated opposite.

Never, before those two hours in the train, had I had enough leisure in which to relive my Berkeley time so methodically, so fondly. During all the months I spent with Norman, the progress, and finally the crisis of our fragile happiness, had monopolized every hour of every day. Even when misunderstandings had crept between us, had dug holes which only too soon grew deeper, even then I had not let my mind look backwards to the beginning of our life together.

But that was precisely what I was doing now. For the first time I saw certain things clearly in those early months which I had not seen for what they were.

Seated in the train, I saw more clearly than I had ever done before. The vision I conjured up was of a new Norman. The other, who had brought me disappointment and weariness, whom in the long run I had wanted to leave, was now scarcely recognizable. Doubtless he had remained behind in his mountains at the edge of his lake. The second was with me still. It would be a long time before he vanished. And it

was *that* Norman who, of the two, was the more alive, the more real.

I did not deliberately choose him. He imposed himself upon my consciousness. Like a wild bird—and there may, perhaps, have been some relationship between him and a bird—he had finished molting, had shed that first plumage which sometimes had seemed to me to have lost its luster. He glowed now in my memory where I could not help but find him.

A long, painful sigh escaped me. Alas! not yet had I come to the end of my longing for Norman.

“Still tired?” Simon asked.

We had arrived.

2.

MY brother had been perfectly right. There was no sign of any Boussardel upon the platform, not the faintest indication of a cousin, male or female. So complete an absence gave me the measure of the orders issued. They must have been uncompromising, passed around the house by word of mouth and telephoned across the Parc Monceau around which the family clustered.

But when I stepped onto the platform there was still a sizable crowd. The first train had disgorged two or three American film stars, but the throng still lingered, waiting for the boxer. He had taken the last train for the same reason as I. Our cases were identical, except that he had been met

at Le Havre by a swarm of friends and relations in which women and babies in arms predominated.

His appearance at the carriage door, heralded by the presence of journalists and photographers, produced an immense press of sightseers. Continually losing my porter and finding him again, separated from my brother, worming my way through the concourse, it was only with the utmost difficulty that I reached the exit. But at last I arrived at my goal and joined Simon, who led me away to where his car was parked. I was still feeling bruised and irritated. It was as though I had sneaked into Paris by the back door, and had had to fight hard in the process.

The damp mistiness of an autumn evening made the streets look wet, and clung to the windows of the car. I lowered the right-hand one and eagerly peered into the fading light. I had behaved in just such a manner on my arrival in the United States, when, driving in a taxi through New York, I had found it even more stupendous and exciting than I had imagined. In the rue de la Pepinière—"I don't remember that café, surely it's new?" I said to my brother.

"Correct," said Simon with a trace of superiority in his voice. As though in answer to my words, and to indulge my fanciful mood, he set the double windshield wipers moving. In front of me a long vista of lights, cars and crowds opened up. We pulled up at a road junction.

"Saint-Augustin!" I said in spite of myself.

"Correct!" said Simon, faintly mocking. "You will find everything in its accustomed place." At the far end of the rue de Courcelles he slowed down to take the corner into the Avenue Van Dyck. We drove in through the monumen-

tal gateway crowned with its four globes of frosted glass. My heart began to thud.

My brother did not drive under the carriage entry, but drew up in front of the house. He no longer lived there, and after the family dinner, would return with his own family to the Place Malesherbes.

I stood on the sidewalk and looked up. The street lamps were glowing through the mist. Separated by the branches of the trees on which a few last leaves were hanging, long pencils of light and darkness fanned out into the night. The front of the house was unilluminated. But though I could not see it with my eyes, I was conscious of the riot of ornament with which this family mansion of ours was overloaded. The too-fecund imagination of its architect had festooned every molding, every lintel, every cornice. There were scrolls and swags and Neptunes and dragons and Negroes, all in solid stone and every conceivable "manner," fireplaces surmounted with pine cones, chimney stacks like family tombs, projecting ledges adorned with women's heads cut off at the neck. On the south front my brothers had once discovered one of these heads which had a noble but vacant expression. They said it was the very image of me. Once, on my birthday, they had managed, from a nearby window, to adorn this monstrosity with a paper crown and then run about the house shouting, "It's the birthday of the lady with her head cut off!" Not for the world would I have admitted it to anybody, but the fact could not be denied: I *did* look like the lady with her head cut off.

The concierge remained invisible within his lodge, but

tinkled his little bell to inform the domestic staff in the house. Two strokes, which meant a member of the family. A young footman, new to me, opened the front door at the top of the steps.

"Isn't Emile here any longer?" I asked my brother.

"You will find Emile greatly aged, my dear. He has developed a limp, and can do nothing now but superintend the service of meals."

We shed our outer garments. Not a soul showed up in the hall. I looked toward the staircase, but in vain.

"Where is madame?" I asked the servant, and then, to make my meaning clearer, added, "My grandmother."

"Madame is in her boudoir on the first floor, mademoiselle." Ignoring the lift, I had already started to walk up. Simon had tactfully made himself scarce. No doubt he was hurrying up the service flight to my mother's room, where she was almost certainly waiting impatient for news.

I was unaccompanied, therefore, when I penetrated into my grandmother's presence. I found her seated in her usual armchair, her back to the windows. She would never allow herself to be moved, and remained, after the sun had set, sitting in precisely the same spot where she sat in the daytime, so as to get the light without discomfort. For the house looked directly onto the Parc Monceau, and the glare, so she said, gave her the most terrible headaches. She had announced that fact once and for all twenty years ago, and now, over ninety, almost incapable of movement, and virtually dumb, was not going to change her mind. In fact, she had never so much as glanced at the Park and its flower beds, nor yet at the hundred-year-old sycamore which grew

next to the house and had been planted before she was born.

"The people in the public gardens make so much noise," she used to say; "it will end by driving me out of my mind."

But that was far from the case. The older she grew the more indifferent did she become to all sounds from the outside world.

When I entered the room, her personal maid was with her. This excellent woman, scarcely, if at all, younger than her mistress, had grown gray in the Boussardel service. Profoundly conscious of what was due to her employer, she was sitting uncomfortably on the very edge of a low chair. With a pair of steel spectacles perched on her nose, she was reading aloud from *Le Temps*. As had been the case yesterday, as would be the case tomorrow, Granny, during this unvarying ceremony, kept her eyes shut—the better to hear, so she said. But it was obvious that she had dozed off, lulled by the reading voice. If the woman stopped for a moment, the old lady immediately opened her eyes and called her to order by thumping the arm of her chair. The silence had wakened her. When I was very small I always fancied that there was a vague and shadowy world inside Granny's head.

"It is Mademoiselle Agnès," said old Francisa, rising to her feet.

I had moved close to my grandmother. She gave me a heavy-lidded stare, as though to get once more accustomed to my presence. She stretched out her hands and drew me to her, went through the gesture of kissing me on the forehead, and then released me without uttering a single word.

She had grown stouter. In her young days Queen Victoria had been her heroine, and she had never varied in her choice

of a model. In the long run she had grown to resemble her. But now, when she was several years older than her idol, it was as though she had gone too far, had abused the right she claimed to indulge in respectful imitation. Granny was rapidly becoming a caricature. She had spread. Her head was sinking lower and lower into her bosom which was thrust upwards by her stays. She had large, heavy-lobed ears of the kind one sees in certain statues of the Buddha. But her projecting lower lip gave her an expression of self-satisfied disdain in which there was majestic dignity.

She was the only member of the family of whom it could be said that she had, if not distinction, at least an element of "class." The others, all of them, were nothing but coarse bourgeois. Granny was a member of the higher bourgeoisie. Her father had been the comte Clapier. His title dated from the First Empire, his fortune from the Second. It was considerable and came, principally, from Peruvian guano.

I had taken my seat on the low chair. I never grew tired of looking at this very old lady to whom, in the far distant past, I owed my existence. What a weight of years she bore! What an enormous stretch of time lay behind her! Until quite recently she had presided, from the depths of her arm-chair, over every incident of my life. I could not help being fond of her.

I took the hand that was lying in her lap. "How are you feeling, Granny?" I asked, with something like a lump in my throat.

Her only reply was a muttering between closed lips. "I can see," I went on, smiling at the old servant, "that you are still being well looked after."

To this there was the same answer. Grunting noises took the place of spoken language.

No one else had come into the room. I could no longer think of anything to say. I remembered to give Francisa a kiss. She asked me about my journey, and I clutched at the conversational straw. I described the ship, my cabin, life on board. My grandmother had shut her eyes again.

At last the door was thrown open, and my Aunt Emma appeared. She came into the room striding ahead of my mother. In spite of her sixty-seven years, and the thick pile of the carpet, her flat heels made a rapping sound. The old boudoir suddenly woke to life.

"Good evening, my kitten!" trumpeted my aunt. She always had an air of triumph, as though she had just emerged from a successful argument.

She was echoed, though in quieter and more pleasant tones: "Good evening, my treasure." This from my mother, bringing up the rear.

Each of them in her own manner, and each so unlike the other, had uttered those words as one might address a servant whom one did not very much like. In the eyes of my aunt, who called me "kitten," I certainly was no soft and gentle domestic animal; nor, in my mother's, was I a treasure.

But already I had been made the recipient of the Boussardel kiss: four times, two kisses from each. A mere mockery dispensed at random . . . "*pfui . . . pfui*" . . . withdrawn almost before it was given, forgotten before it was received. It came to me out of the distant past of childhood. I recognized, too, in the moment of its bestowal, Aunt Emma's

peculiar smell: a smell of crepe—she always wore crepe—of ashes gone cold, of poor soil. Ever since she had begun to suffer from her liver, this smell had been growing more and more noticeable, and less and less tolerable.

“Well?” said my mother with sugary sweetness, nodding her head as though she were talking to a baby.

“Well—not too tired?”

“My dear Marie,” said my aunt, “at *her* age there would be something very much the matter if she were: not but what . . .”

She took my chin between her bony fingers. She turned my face so that she could see first one side of it, then the other. She puckered her lips and made a face, like somebody aping the tricks of a connoisseur.

“Take that hat off, so that I may see you better . . . *Quais!*”—that exclamation was another Boussardel specialty—“How old are you?”

“Twenty-six, Aunt Emma, as you very well know.”

“If I go to the trouble of asking you, it’s because I have forgotten! I have other things to occupy my mind, thank heavens! You don’t imagine, I suppose, that I tell over the record of your life instead of saying my prayers?”

“Ha-ha! How like you, Emma!” said my mother with a laugh.

Too indirect in her methods to deliver a frontal attack, my mother excelled in the art of underlining the malicious sallies made by others, and so turning them into seeming treacheries.

“Twenty-six,” went on my aunt. “Well, all I can say is, kitten, that you look more.”

"That is quite possible."

"I know what it is . . . there's . . . I can't find the right word—there is something not quite so *young girl* about you as there was—or am I wrong?"

"Oh, Aunt Emma," I replied, not flinching under her gaze, "you know how bad a judge one is of oneself. I am prepared to take your word for it."

"You do me too much honor: what you really mean is—Aunt Emma, I admit that you are right!"

"Not at all: what I really mean is that I don't care."

"Don't care that you are no longer a young girl?"

"That I don't *look* like a young girl. I am not particularly vain about my appearance."

"You always manage to have the last word, don't you?"

I could not resist saying, "I am glad you realize that I haven't changed."

So that was that. We had all slipped back into our familiar roles. We knew them backwards. We did not, any of us, want to alter the old readings.

I felt at once amused and annoyed. There was a silence. Aunt Emma and I were taking one another's measure with our eyes, but smilingly, though our smiles were different. She had assumed her regular position and now stood behind her mother, leaning on the chair back. Should it become necessary to do so, she would speak in Granny's name, in the name of the still-ruling head of the family. She would do it, too, without consulting the old lady, knowing only too well that she could declaim with impunity.

My mother was seated close by. She was merely Granny's daughter-in-law, and younger than my aunt. Those two facts

determined her rank in the hierarchy. She was perfectly prepared to accept it. She had assumed an air of kindly self-effacement and used it as a weapon, as other women use their brilliance or their authority.

There I was, face to face with my three relatives.

Aunt Emma said, "Anyhow, you look well."

At these words my mother suddenly riveted her eyes on my face, and the look she gave me should really have belonged to somebody else. For the sharpness that sometimes showed in her eyes gave the lie to the flabby softness of her features. It was as though she were wearing a mask, the mask of a jovial lover of life. But through the eye-holes an entirely different person looked out.

She said slowly, "Yes, she's a sight for sore eyes."

Again that look of deliberate appraisal. I saw it travel all the way down my body, and then move up again. It paused when it reached my legs, my waist, my breast. I felt as though it were stripping the clothes from my body.

My mother had never been beautiful, not even pleasant to look at. One had only to look at the family photograph albums to realize that. Nevertheless, when she was twenty she had refused an officer whom she liked, and perhaps even loved, because he had no money. Her position must have been difficult, since she had no great fortune of her own. She was the daughter of her mother's second marriage, a mother who, though Grandfather's sister, had been left a widow at thirty-three with the four children she had had by her first husband. A superabundance of brothers and sisters had diminished her dowry and her prospects. She was con-

nected with the Boussardels, though she neither bore their name nor benefited from their opulence. How could that state of affairs be remedied? She had picked on her first cousin and deliberately married him, repugnant though he was to her. She never forgave him.

Nor had she ever forgiven me. She bore me a grudge because I despised the calculations to which she had sacrificed her happiness. She had tried, though she cared nothing for me, and as though by doing so she could somehow clear her conscience, to bring me up in her own image. But I had shown myself to be pigheaded, and this she had regarded as an odious act of treason on my part . . . a rebellious daughter who wanted to live her own life! *Ouais!* She was furious and bitterly resentful.

To make matters worse, I was far from ugly. True it would not be long before I should have to wage perpetual war against the threat of heaviness in hips and chin, a state which I gloomily attributed to my double heritage. For Marie Boussardel, however, who had been born in the days of opulent curves and married during the Great Exhibition, I must have stood, physically, for an ideal which she had never been able to make her own.

There are many mothers who, as soon as their daughters reach marriageable age, see them as women different from themselves. How jealous mine must have been, how difficult she must have found it that I not only refused to conform with her plans for me, but was also the kind of woman I had turned out to be. She had never enjoyed my radiant health, nor possessed my long, muscular legs, my firm belly,

my high breasts, my mouth, my eyes, my hair. . . . It gave me pleasure to know that I was so different. That fact alone made it possible for me to think of her without anger.

I looked at her now, slumped in a charming little Louis XVI chair, the proportions of which seemed to be lost under the weight of her body. She was wearing a yellow dress. All her life long she had loved bright colors. She fondly believed that they improved her appearance, whereas actually they accentuated her stoutness. She had a positive genius for choosing the cut which would least flatter her. This persistent blindness of hers astonished me. I had always admired her competence as a housewife. She had at her finger tips all the traditional secrets for repairing curtains, silk and lace. Her bedroom and her boudoir had a handsome look. She slept in fine linen. But her taste stopped dead when it came to adorning her own person. One might have thought that she had employed her worst enemy to design her clothes. But they were the product of her own choice, and she would never take anybody's advice where they were concerned.

3.

MY Aunt Emma was wiser. She maintained that only those establishments which specialize in mourning at short notice know how to cut a dress correctly. Consequently, for more than thirty-five years she had been the only regular customer of one of these firms, and had worn the sort of garment that is turned out at twenty-four hours' notice for funerals.

She had assumed this livery when Grandpapa died, declaring that she would never "leave off the mourning which she had put on as a tribute to the father whom she had adored." Many and many were the times when I had heard her say the same thing, always hurriedly, always in a voice completely devoid of emotion. Had she genuinely loved her father?—Not a bit of it! She loved nobody. . . .

Aunt Emma clung to her mourning because it served her purposes. These were less villainous than her words might have led one to suppose. Basically, in spite of her often cruel turns of speech, she was not remarkable for subtlety. There was really only one thought in her mind—the family. Not so much love of the family, because my aunt had no warm feelings for any member of it, but just the Family-in-Itself, and all that in it, through it, she could experience, plan and achieve.

Of Granny's four children, the eldest was Théodore. Then came Aunt Emma, my father, and Aunt Louise. Aunt Emma, therefore, was only the second in seniority. But in the Boussardel family, which was built according to a system of traditions and hierarchies, there was plenty of room for two seniors.

My Uncle Théodore was perfectly willing to share his high office. By nature he was jovial and detached. The business occupied little of his time, and he left all the hard work to be done by my father. The only thing he bothered about was keeping an eye on his house property. Most of his time he gave to shooting. As soon as the season ended he waited impatiently for it to open again, and filled the intervening months with long stories about the animals he had killed.

Now that he was a widower, and his children were married, he had settled down in the family mansion, though he was far too apathetic to assume control of the affairs of his brothers and sisters.

It was Aunt Emma, in her eternal black, who held the reins. Whenever possible she exploited Uncle Théodore's carelessness, my father's sluggishness, and Granny's lethargy. This harnessed team of three made it easy for her to run the family in accordance with her own views, which, though narrow in the extreme, were not really dangerous. The knowledge that she could move her near relations about the board precisely as she liked was all she needed for happiness.

She was, however, secretly guided, in her turn, by my mother, whose intentions were far less innocent.

My mother pretended to submit to the advice and instructions of my aunt. She flattered her; especially in her presence. She did not in the least mind effacing herself and playing the part of the timid mouse. "Alas!" she would say, with a sweet smile, "I haven't got Emma's brain. The only gift that I can claim is common sense." But when she said this I always noticed that she turned her face away, fearful lest the look of sarcasm which accompanied the words might give her away.

This play-acting cost her nothing. The only members of the family she cared about at all were my two brothers. There was nothing she would not do to advance them. In the business, as well as in the domestic circle, she so worked that every object of value, every privilege, every favor should come *their* way.

No one but I seemed to have noticed this, and the more

she tried to conceal this favoritism from me, the more aware of it I became. I must admit that I had a great deal of quiet fun, when dining with Simon or with Valentin, pointing to some object—a picture, perhaps, which had not formerly been in the room, and saying, “Hullo, isn’t that the little Girodet-Triosin which used to hang in the smoking room in the Avenue Van Dyck?” Or I would draw attention very audibly to some piece of jewelry, now adorning one of my sisters-in-law, which I knew to be Granny’s and intended, ultimately, for me. But I soon grew tired of this little game. By harping too much on these small misappropriations, I might have led my brothers to think that I felt I had been cheated. Fortunately, what my family referred to as my “nasty nature” was entirely disinterested.

All the same, I could not help admiring my mother’s special genius. Her tricks, and the ways they worked to her sons’ advantage, went far beyond a present here or there. She was an extremely complex and an extremely shrewd woman. She deserved a more exalted destiny.

What it all comes to is that the past and the future of the Boussardels remained so closely bound up with domestic affairs that their habits had, in the long run, produced a matriarchy. It was the women who ruled the roost: Granny, officially; Aunt Emma, apparently; my mother, in fact.

Our little skirmish seemed to have satisfied my aunt. It was pretty clear that she and my mother would go no further for the moment. Simon had certainly told them of our talk at Le Havre, and of how he had found himself up against a blank wall.

* * *

When I reached the studio I had contrived for myself on the third floor, well away from the family, some obscure motive which I can't explain—fear perhaps, or modesty—kept me from looking around it as people do who suddenly renew acquaintance with their former environment. I took no notice of the walls, nor did I go to the windows beneath which the Park of my childhood now lay silent.

During my interview with Granny my luggage had been brought up. It contained a few mementoes for my closer relatives. I took out the various small parcels, and for a moment held them in my hands. Then, "No, I'll give them later," I said to myself; "there will be too many people at dinner this evening, and I've brought nothing for the cousins or for Aunt Julianne." I shut them away in one of my drawers.

Nobody knocked at my door; nobody called me on the house-telephone. There was no point in my waiting longer. I went into the dressing room.

The shower felt soft and feeble. The ones to which I had grown accustomed in America had a stinging impact that had set my blood racing and massaged my flesh. With what, now, should I replace its beneficial effects if I did not want to submit to encroaching fat?

I sat for a while on the edge of my divan. I was wearing a dinner gown suited to the small family occasion. I felt idle and completely empty-headed. Would nothing happen this evening?

Where were they all? In which of the rooms were they gathered? What secret confabulation was going on? They invariably made a point of arriving early for these dinner

parties. The company must, by this time, be almost complete. I could almost hear Aunt Emma receiving them in succession: "Not a hint so far!" Simon, to excuse his lack of success, would, no doubt, be giving his version of our meeting and making a joke of my woodenheaded obstinacy.

Each, as his or her feelings prompted, would be exclaiming, "What did I tell you?"—"Mark my words . . ."—"Our Agnès is a dark horse!" My appearance would silence every tongue. They would all pretend not to be thinking about me. . . . I was in no hurry to interrupt their conference . . . nor to see them again. I had already got the feel of them.

I stayed where I was with ears strained to catch the least sound. I could feel the presence of the house beneath me. I was acutely aware of all the doors, all the passages and hidden corners, all the big and little rooms which I knew by heart so that I could have moved about them blindfold. I knew precisely how each was furnished . . . it was as though I could actually see through floors and ceilings. I had a consciousness of the house under my feet, and all around it, of the Parc Monceau which it dominated like a spider at the center of its web.

So many things bound us to this particular district. It had made us rich. My great-grandfather and my great-grand-uncle, the two founders of our wealth, had made their money entirely by speculating in real estate lying between La Petite-Pologne and Le Haut-Roule. My great-grandmother had been a Bitzian, a cousin of the Baroness Haussmann. This relationship, and the useful advice which had come to my forebears as a result of it, had often made the

Boussardel brothers prosperous rivals of Pereire, the banker. It had brought the family a sizable fortune and thirty or so "parcels" of house property, chief of which was the mansion itself which our three ancestors, about the year 1865, had built on the outskirts of what had formerly been Philippe Egalité's park. Around this dwelling were scattered the many houses inhabited by the various Boussardels. None of these lay beyond the limits of the fief. The less fortunate members of the family had put up with quite serious sacrifices in order to maintain gloomy little apartments near the Batignolles and the Ternes. The more favored, those who owned houses at the bottom end of the Avenue Hoche, or on the Place Malesherbes, professed to entertain a lofty scorn of the more snobbish quarters along the banks of the Seine and in the neighborhood of the Bois. A complex sentiment, which was part dignity, part gratitude, and part superstition, kept all of them faithful to the Plaine Monceau.

But what sort of compulsion was there upon me? Why had I remained a prisoner of this city within a city, of this family to which I was attached by no genuine warmth of feeling? Its yoke weighed heavily upon my shoulders, but I did nothing to throw it off. I bore it uneasily, but I bore it, and when chance gave me an opportunity to escape from it, back I came again.

What magic, what horrible power of prestige, was at work to make such solidarity possible?

4.

THE gong sounded for dinner. It always made me think of the signal still employed in some theatres to announce the rise of the curtain.

At last something was going to happen.

My entry into the drawing room on the first floor, where the company was now assembled, caused no excitement. Those present went out of their way to keep the chatter going. Aunt Emma, who had collected a small group round Granny's chair, hastily directed the conversation into fresh channels. At the other end of the room Simon was embarking upon a sea of words for the benefit of his cousins, who always listened to him with close attention.

"Reading these new Decrees," he declared, "gives one the feeling that the men who drafted them have never had any firsthand knowledge of what an inheritance means. And they are the people who are called upon to govern us! Hulloo!" he added, turning in my direction. "Here's Agnès."

The effect produced by his words was very curious. Old and young alike looked at me, not so much appraisingly as casually, said "good evening" and not "how are you?" and behaved generally as though, instead of having just returned from a prolonged stay in America, I had merely been spending the week end at Fontainebleau.

There was one surprise, however. My Aunt Louise crossed the room with a slight show of embarrassment, and said, "Agnès, dear, how nice to see you again."

She gave me a genuine kiss, and then returned through an icy hush to her corner. Everyone was obviously thinking of the "dressing-down" which Aunt Emma had in store for her. No one dared to break the silence which had endowed her poor little attempt at taking the initiative with all the importance of a manifestation. Fortunately, just at that moment old Emile appeared to announce dinner.

My place at table had been changed. During my absence several of the younger generation had reached an age which entitled them to dine with the grownups. This reinforcement in no way disturbed the main body of the guests who were concentrated at the far end of the table. I found myself between my second cousin and the eldest of my nephews. Not far off was my cousin Geneviève, and my young sister-in-law Hélène-Valentin.

I should point out that if the numerous Boussardel males are distinguished one from another by their Christian names and the degree of their relationship—uncle, cousin, or nephew—things are not so easy for their wives. The family is far too vain to tolerate the mere addition of a bride's first names. By marrying, she automatically becomes a Boussardel. In this way her origins are entirely suppressed. A hyphenated name of no importance is not to be thought of! Besides, why imitate persons who consider it distinguished to assume such hybrid forms as Durand-Michard or Morin-Duval? . . . Consequently, all that is done is to join the Christian name of the wife with that of her husband. Boussardel is merely implied. My sisters-in-law, therefore, were known as Hélène-Valentin or Suzanne-Gaston. There were

two Jeannes: Jeanne-Simon and Jeanne-Paul. My mother was Marie-Ferdinand. Almost all of them signed their letters in that way, as other wives in history once signed theirs La Vergne-LaFayette, or Polastron-Polignac.

The ends of the table being thus rejuvenated, I expected to find among my neighbors a greater freedom of talk, and more sympathy. I would tell them all about the United States. I felt in a mood for anecdote. Not that I was seeking a chance to shine, especially not before an audience of young, untraveled creatures whom it would not be difficult to surprise. No, I simply wanted to talk about the country I had just left, to mention a few American cities, and to introduce into the conversation one or two American names. I was like one of those women in love who, by artless allusion, bring the talk around to the one subject which interests them, so as to be able to speak certain words and casually to mention a certain name, thereby "giving themselves away."

But not a single person in my immediate proximity so much as asked me a question. The boys, no doubt, were shy. I could scarcely believe that they were completely devoid of all curiosity about my trip. Obviously, I should have to start the subject myself.

But I was not given an opportunity to do so. My Aunt Emma had laid her spoon in her soup plate, there to remain idle until such time as she should decide to absorb its contents.

"Guess what happened to me in the bus!" With a rapid glance to right and left, she sounded a warning to the whole table. No escape was possible; everyone had to listen.

"Oh, Emma dear," said my mother, with a carefully assumed look of anxious solicitude, "I do hope you had no unpleasant experience?"

"If I did not, it was only because I had the presence of mind to assert myself."

"That I am sure you did," my mother fawningly remarked.

Silence being now assured, my aunt consumed one half of her soup. She did not put the spoon straight into her mouth, as common people do, but delicately held it sideways to her lips and then introduced the liquid into her interior with a loud, sucking sound. The company waited.

"Well," she said at last, "I had taken an 'S.'" After launching this piece of information she emptied her soup plate.

Aunt Emma adored public conveyances. Although the Boussardel garage contained three cars, she never made use of any of them. Often when, on returning home, she pretended to be exhausted from shopping, I would say, "But why didn't you take the limousine?"—"Because," she would reply, "there would have been no point in my doing so," speaking in tones of one announcing some irrefutable fact, as though, for instance, she had said, "Because the car has been sold."

The truth of the matter was that public conveyances served to distract her mind. Being lazy and talkative, she never knew how to fill the time, and did not want the days to end too quickly. Added to this was the fact that traveling in buses greatly reduced her fear of accidents. In them, she said, she felt in a stronger position. Taxis, which she always called cabs, were objects of abomination to her. They were,

she maintained, full of germs; besides, one never knew to what sort of a driver one was entrusting oneself. She infinitely preferred public conveyances.

She was one of those persons to whom things were always "happening," in shops, in banks, or in the Metro. Buses were her chosen field of activity, the more so because they brought her in contact with Life.

In them she learned a thousand things, the existence of which she would never otherwise have suspected. She knew nothing of the world at large; people did not exist for her unless her attention was drawn to them. She never really read the papers, but was avid for gossip. "Do you know what a lady told me yesterday in a 37? In Spain people are dying of hunger!" Until then, such a possibility had never occurred to her.

"I had taken an 'S.' I was on my way home from Saint-Sulpice where I had been told there was an ecclesiastical furnisher's with stocks of those big twisted candles which I like to have for the drawing-room chandeliers. You don't find them in the big stores nowadays—which doesn't surprise me in a period when everything is going to wrack and ruin—I had made up my mind to visit the establishment . . . as you know, I never spare myself."

She remained silent for a few moments, and was careful to look at nobody in particular, so that each might think that the intended reproach was aimed at him or her.

Then she plunged into her tale. The story she had to tell was trivial in the extreme—a matter of some stopping place which had been moved because of repair work in the rue de Courcelles. The point was that Aunt Emma had not been

able to get out at her usual lamppost. By this time the *dran*.a had acquired substance. The bus, after passing the Avenue Van Dyck, had gone on all the way to the next stop on the boulevard. She had protested. An angry discussion had taken place on the platform of the vehicle. Aunt Emma knew that she had been within her rights. There had been no indication of the change *inside* the bus. The conductor had rung the bell, and they had started off again. All right then, if they wanted to drive her to extremes, well and good. She would go to the end of the line, demand to see the Inspector, and lodge her complaint in due form!

I ventured an aside to my cousin: "D'you know that in New York, on the subway . . ."

He uttered a hurried *Ssh!* and silenced me with a warning finger. His eyes were fixed on the narrator. He was really listening to her.

Suddenly I said to myself, "What a fool you are! Isn't it always the same old story? Family dinners under this roof never vary. Have you ever known any subject mentioned at them to rise above the level of stories about servants, shops, or children's ailments? Don't you realize that such talk, which each and every guest must know is idiotic and would denounce as such anywhere else, becomes suddenly worthy of serious attention, simply and solely because it has to do with the Boussardels?"

Meanwhile the meal pursued its formal course. From the richness of the dishes and the wines, from the way the table was dressed, from the care given to the service, one would have thought that one was moving in an elegant and refined society. The damask cloth was worked with a scene repre-

senting the wine harvest. It set off to advantage the Limoges service, mean and outmoded in design but all of the most precious porcelain. The glasses were so heavy that when lifting them, one never knew whether they were full or empty.

And this was only the number 3 service. In the locked cupboards of the pantry was stored away the China service and the Sèvres service with the intertwined B's—Boussardel-Bitzius, off which the Princesse de Metternich had once eaten—as well as table silver dating from the Empire, Saxe and Wedgwood centerpieces and epergnes, and those oddities, now fallen into disuse but thus all the more fascinating to me when I was a child, finger bowls of clouded crystal, punch sets of iridescent glass.

In our cellars were stored the most famous vintages. The acquiring and hoarding of them had always been as much a Boussardel tradition as was the ritual of a noble cuisine. But it was also a Boussardel tradition that food for the mind should be crude and coarse. In this house, refinement stopped at household matters. They ate like lords, but talked like doorkeepers.

The feast had taken its predetermined course. It had now reached the "bird" stage—*pheasant à la Sainte Alliance*, a complicated dish superbly done. This was washed down with a Clos-Vougeot of one of the great years. Unfortunately, though it was considered "the thing" to know all about food and wine, it was considered quite unnecessary to taste either. I can still see my kinsfolk devouring the most wonderful dishes and finding in them nothing more than a stimulus to oratory. And what oratory! Game prepared

with the most exquisite care and knowledge vanished, with its accompaniment of rare Burgundy, down gaping maws and all that came out in return was spite, malice and nonsense.

I gave up attempting to listen. This table talk had clamped down on me, had plunged me back into the Bous-sardel bath, the Boussardel broth. Oh, these family meals! If only it was possible to cut them short! To do without all the quarreling, jealousy, humiliation and rancor! It is in the dining room that children learn to listen, note and judge. It is there that the elders show themselves in their true colors, there that daughters come to dread their mothers. I have only to pass my hands over the walls, over the fine Cordova leather that deserves better company, to gather the dust of my old illusions, of my lost youth.

By this time Uncle Théodore was in the conversational saddle. He, like almost all my relations, had a loud voice. He talked more than usually loud because he talked well, and knew it. He could express himself in speech as Voltaire wrote, and infinitely surpassed his sister Emma's far humbler efforts. The admirable French which he knew so well how to handle, enlisted in the service of an only too obviously low-grade intelligence, impressed one as being one of the injustices of fate.

This massive Nimrod was a hirsute creature whose beard reached to his eyes. His hair, once tawny, was now yellowish-white. Uncle Théodore looked like some ancient woodland animal, some autumnal beast of prey. All day long he smoked the most atrocious cigars which had imparted a rusty stain to his colorless beard. The backs of his

hands were hairy, and they, too, showed the same reddish pollution. No one could have been less the sporting type, except where shooting was concerned. Of this he boasted as if it were an occupation forbidden to the vulgar mob. When he spoke of it, Aunt Emma could play her part in the conversation, for she herself was among the higher initiates. She, too, went shooting: the blood of animals caused no revulsion in her. She knew as well as any man how to put the fear of God into a hare, and her favorite story, which she always told with loud laughter, was that of a young woman to whom the honors of the shoot had been extended, and who had fainted dead away on being given a still-warm amputated foot.

I could not help hearing what my uncle was saying:

"Had a setter bitch once, called Caline—wonderful nose. On one occasion, in Sologne, just as I was thinking of packing up because it was getting late . . ."

I stopped listening; the story was too familiar. I forced myself to think of something else, and the name Sologne, far from bringing to my mind our property on the banks of the Beuvron, set my thoughts wandering to a very different tract of grassland, in a place which, ever since I had first seen it, had been for me the very epitome of the Prairie. There, for the first time I had come to realize, in all its eccentricity, all its grandeur, the destiny of the pioneers of the New World. It had made the heroes of Fenimore Cooper and Mayne Reid, of whom till then I had had but a very vague picture, rise before my eyes as they truly must have been.

In the western United States, when spring comes, the

desert flowers burst forth for a few short weeks. People drive out from the cities to revel in the amazing sight. For miles and miles they traverse a sterile waste, and then, all of a sudden, find before them the riot of blossom they have come to see. They draw up on the edge of the colored expanse, as on the banks of a lake. The desert stretches to a great distance. Wherever there is the slightest undulation it merges with the sky and becomes indistinguishable from the misty blue of the horizon. Many and varied are these pilgrimages, and no two offer the same spectacle, for each has its own peculiar coloring. In the Mojave desert there are blue lupins and red poppies; near Bakersville the pink verbena is thick upon the ground; and out toward Silver Lake, those short-stemmed white flowers the name of which I have forgotten.

“Don’t let your mind wander, my kitten!”

This injunction came from Aunt Emma, who was again embarked upon a tide of words. She was treating the table to another story. Not one of the guests but would say on returning home, “Gracious! what a bore Aunt Emma was at dinner!”—but for the time being all were listening to her with what appeared to be respect.

But it was at me in particular, me, her “kitten,” that her words had been aimed. Perhaps she believed that what she was now talking about might benefit me, or it may have been a little too obvious that my thoughts were far away.

We had by now reached the dessert course, and it seemed as though the meal would never end. Aunt Emma was describing her return journey from Hardelot, where Simon owned a villa which he had inherited from his first wife. Every summer the family discharged onto it a deadweight

of children and adults. This year that had meant my six nephews and nieces, their nurses, my mother, and my expectant sister-in-law. This human circus was sent there "for the bathing," while my elder brother, the happy husband and father, went off on an Oriental cruise with Valentin and Hélène, my father stayed on in Paris to look after the business, Granny dozed with her back to the Parc Monceau, and Uncle Théodore retreated to Sologne for the shooting. Aunt Emma was to have joined him, but had spontaneously sacrificed forty-eight hours of her holiday to go to the aid of poor Marie and give her a hand in the task of "repatriating" her young brood, their English attendants, and her unfortunate daughter-in-law, who was nearing her "time."

She had reserved two complete carriages from Boulogne, one of which would be filled by the children and the nurses. Being an experienced traveler, she had arranged for the journey to be made on a Saturday. It meant, of course, that the children would be deprived of twenty-four hours of the country air, since school did not start for the older ones until Monday. But the train would be far less crowded, and the three women would be able to relax. The carriage doors were unlocked; the party piled in; the train started. Everything went well. Only the two youngest were sick. Jeanne-Simon did not have one of her "bad spells." It wouldn't be long now before they were home. They had already reached Saint-Denis. . . . But what was happening? Why was the train pulling up outside the station, bang in the middle of the town? Five minutes, ten minutes, passed. Aunt Emma lowered the window, leaned out, and took a good look around. But she was out of luck . . . no sign of a railway-

man on the track for her to question. Not another head visible down the whole length of the train. No one was leaning out. Did *nobody* else feel worried? Really, how extraordinary people were! . . . It was then that the banging of buffers announced that the train was about to resume its onward way. But something made her prick up her ears and lean out still farther. What was that sound? Heavens above! . . . the "Internationale"!

Having spoken the horrid word, Aunt Emma sat for a moment speechless. Then, in order to justify this well-managed piece of drama:

"I must admit," she said, "that I gasped! Put yourselves in my place . . . I was responsible for the safety of ten human beings . . . the 'Internationale' . . . Marie refused to believe me. . . . Oh, I am not blaming you, my dear sister, the whole thing really was inconceivable! But for the last twenty years I have grown sick and tired of telling you that one can no longer make a train journey in safety, and you see now that I was right. They were singing the 'Internationale,' and in such shrill, hysterical voices, too! I did not hesitate for a moment. I seized Marie by the arm and said, 'Sister, be brave! I will not abandon you,' and resumed my seat. I had the children and the nurses brought into our carriage. I was prepared to use my fists, if need be, to intimidate the mob! The rioters would very soon have found out with whom they had to deal!"

"Rioters?" I said. "I didn't know there had been any troubles this autumn."

"Naturally enough there was no word about it in the

papers; there never is until blood begins to flow . . . and not even then!"

"Perhaps a few workmen and young people *were* singing the 'Internationale,' but that doesn't mean—"

"I might have known *you'd* find excuses for them!" my aunt broke in. "It is not hard to see that you have come from a country which is fraternizing with the Soviets!"

"You are quite wrong, Aunt Emma. I can assure you that the United States—"

"I am not interested in the United States, my kitten," she hurriedly declared. "*I* can assure *you* that what happens in the United States is a matter of no concern to me. The spectacle of my own country is quite enough to hold my attention. . . . I am just a Frenchwoman, nothing more nor less!"

She reared her head and flashed an eye. Then, with a movement of the hand, she swept away all that was not essential.

"Besides," she said, "that is not the point. Marie, you will please bear me out: were they, or were they not, singing the 'Internationale'?—they were! . . . Were we, or were we not in the very heart of the Red Zone?—we were! Was the train slow in starting again, or was it not?—it was! Had the train staff disappeared, or had it not?—it had! That, then, was the situation in which we found ourselves!"

She was thoroughly enjoying the effect produced by her oratory, and the general silence which followed it. Then, very solemnly, she announced:

"As things are today, if you leave Paris for a month or

even only for twenty-four hours, you never can be sure what you will find on your return."

To cut her long story short, the train resumed its journey, passed through Saint-Denis without hindrance, reached the Gare du Nord, and there unloaded everybody safe and sound.

"And what really had happened?" I asked.

Aunt Emma raised a professorial finger and very slowly, stressing each separate syllable, said, "That . . we . . shall . . ne . . ver . . know!"

Hélène-Valentin, who is always putting her foot in it, ventured to remark, "But nurse told me—"

One glance from Aunt Emma made her choke back the rest of the sentence.

"*Ouais!*" she said, "I know. I heard all about that. One of the railwaymen explained to your nurse that in Saint-Denis, whenever the children of the secular schools meet the children of the church schools out walking with a priest, they sing that seditious song. . . . Stuff and nonsense! I am not quite as simple as that young woman . . . who, by the way, would be well advised not to paint her face so that it looks like an inn-sign. But that concerns you, not me, my dear. . . ."

What could I have done? I couldn't stuff my fingers in my ears, or recite poetry to myself as I used to do when I couldn't sleep: *Approchez-vous, Néron, et prenez votre place. On veut sur vos soupçons que je vous satisfasse. . . .* The footman was passing a brush over the cloth, for the cheese had been served. Only the fruit now, and the sweet

biscuits, after which everything would be over. I gripped the stem of my largest glass, and with my other hand, that of the smallest. The cut crystal caught the light from the chandeliers, and cast upon the cloth two small, unequal, iridescent fans. I played with the glasses, making the fans meet and mingle. . . .

Once again, the little-girl-Agnès had taken charge. She rose from the depths of my being, swelled like a soap bubble inside a larger bubble, clinging to the shape of my adult self . . . she filled me. Had I crossed the ocean only to bring back to life the ghost of my own past self?

But . . . but . . . what was the name that had just been uttered, striking my ear, bringing me out of my state of torpor and childishness? . . . Others around the table repeated it, its owner was about to be discussed. . . . "No," Aunt Emma, with a quick glance at the servants, murmured mysteriously, "what I have to tell you is in the strictest confidence. Later, when we're in the drawing room."

Everyone now was fully awake and attentive. Something told me that the promised revelation would not be the usual nonsense. For the first time that day I felt at one with the rest of the company. I was interested.

The name circulated. It evoked for me the picture of the one member of the family who was not typically Boussardel. It amazed me to think that I had not bothered about him till now. To think that at Le Havre I had asked Simon for news of so many of my relations, both male and female, while . . .

Aunt Emma had just announced the impending return of

somebody. My cousin had not caught the name. Bending forward, he asked, "Who was it she said?"

It was I who took it upon myself to answer: "Xavier."

5.

XAVIER BOUSSARDEL was my second cousin. There were only three years between us. He was twenty-three, I, twenty-six. We did not, however, belong to the same generation. Both of us were descended from our Bous-sardel-Bitzius ancestors, though he was one degree farther removed from them than I was. This younger branch of the Boussardels had shown so great an eagerness in the matter of marriages and births, that it had outdistanced the elder. By a strange trick of fate, however, illness and violent death had intervened to break the continuity of this hastily produced line. Only one in the present generation had remained, and he was delicate—Xavier.

The Boussardel inheritance is rich only in material wealth. There is a liability not shown in any bank account. Heredity is a less solid item, with us, than inheritance. An ailment of long standing plays fast and loose with the members of our numerous family, disappearing here, re-emerging there. Among my forebears on my father's side it seems to have been altogether effaced. Granny, the sturdy representative of the Clapier strain, had done more than strengthen our urban wealth. She had provided new blood. But since her day, it had been enough for one of her sons, my father, to marry a first cousin whose mother had been a Boussardel,

for the whole situation to be reconstituted, with all its dangers. My sister died of chest trouble, Valentin's lungs are weak, and it will be necessary to keep a watchful eye upon his children.

But Xavier's strain had been the worst affected. His grandfather succumbed at thirty to tuberculosis, and his father, killed by a German shell at Ypres, was only thus saved from falling victim to the same disease. The small boy who was his only son showed early signs of the disease. His mother, however, married again, outside the family, as though intent on escaping the curse which had hung over his birth. She chose as her second husband a high-ranking Colonial official and the two of them vanished from our sight. What of the orphan? Was he to be abandoned? Far from it. He still had his godmother, no less a person than Aunt Emma.

She had large means of her own, and nobody on whom to expend her affection. She took the child under her wing, stipulating only that she should be given *carte blanche* in his upbringing. There was also a tacit understanding that this new object in her life should not in any way be allowed to disturb her ingrained habits.

His health was her first concern. She consulted a great many specialists, and the problem was solved in the best possible way by packing Xavier off to Davos.

He stayed there for several years. From time to time he reappeared, a bewildered stranger to the life of the family, to the turmoil of Paris, to the demands of a lower altitude. Each time he seemed better. The curse was on its way out. It had, in the long run, vanished altogether—or so said the

specialists, though Aunt Emma was not so simple-minded as to accept their verdict blindly. Oh, it wasn't that the boy, now a young man, could in any way be regarded as a nuisance in the house, nor that his godmother, who was "as fond of him as though he had been her own child," was not delighted to have him with her. But . . . but the Plaine Monceau was so damp. What if he had a relapse? Should that happen, Aunt Emma would never forgive herself. The prudent thing to do was to send Xavier back to his mountain fastness—not necessarily to a sanatorium, but to a rented chalet where he could live, looked after by a decent local woman who would see to it that he was well fed.

So back Aunt Emma sent him, for one year; then for a second. Finally, after eleven years, she thought it necessary to bring him home. The doctors advised her to do this. If she didn't, it would look as though the family wanted no more to do with him. In any case, people were quite capable of saying that that was the reason.

So Xavier was coming home.

I had known the whole story for a long while. My cousin's return had been hanging like a threat over the head of his adopted mother even before I went to America. Aunt Emma had announced that he was to take his place in the family circle. I could well imagine her feelings. It would be very pleasant, of course, for her to have a man—he had attained his majority—around her, but what was she to do with him? There could be no question of her sending him elsewhere, for where could she send him?

Aunt Emma had said that she would discuss the matter in the drawing room. But when I went there, with the

others, I learned nothing. As soon as the servants had withdrawn, my aunt had regrouped the adults around Granny's chair; that is to say, those who were over fifty. The others, though for the most part they were parents in their own right, still figured, in her eyes, as "the children." The coming into the world of a new generation had not promoted us to the status of grown-ups. Except for Simon. It was he who now questioned my aunt. Moved by a curiosity which surprised even myself, I went close to the group, carrying my cup of coffee in my hand. But my mother saw me coming and shot a warning glance at Emma, who broke off what she was saying.

"You must forgive us, darling," said my mother, smiling self-consciously, "but your aunt has something she wants to tell us." Adding, with marked emphasis, "in confidence."

All eyes were upon me.

"It is I who should apologize," I said, "for being guilty of so blatant a piece of tactlessness. I was bringing you some coffee."

"All those who want coffee have it already, my kitten," Aunt Emma shot at me.

I turned on my heel. But as I passed my Aunt Louise, she put out her hand and took the cup from me with a shy "thank you." I rejoined my cousins and my sisters-in-law. Obedient to family custom, they were holding themselves aside.

On their side of the room, gathered about Granny, the elders were talking in hushed voices. I concluded that they were discussing money matters, for that is one of the striking characteristics of my family. As other people lower their

voices and send the children away when the talk turns to sex, the Boussardels do those things when they want to speak about incomes, dowries and inheritances. From our earliest childhood, we Boussardels have instilled into us the religion of money in general, and of pride in the money we possess, but we are never allowed to touch it, even with words. All conversations on that subject are confined to the elders, the actual owners of the capital. The young are left in ignorance.

I know, for instance, that Aunt Louise is considered to be poor, and Aunt Emma rich, but what the actual size of their incomes is I have no idea. The bulk of the family fortune at the time of which I am speaking was in Granny's hands, but what did that fortune represent in figures? Twenty million? thirty million? a hundred million? The possibilities seemed endless. To all appearances we lived on a grand scale, but then, to all appearances, too, we had to economize on sugar and candles in order to "make ends meet." If we ventured to raise the question, we were told that there was "no need" for us to know. When the subject of my marriage was aired, and I rejected the various young men whose names were mentioned in this connection, "Well, then," I was told, "make a suggestion yourself: we will give it every consideration." But when I wanted to know what the amount of my dowry was to be, I was curtly refused the information I was asking for.

To what were these tactics attributable? To some moral principle? No, for any such reason would have been in flat contradiction to that pride in money which was preached to us day in and day out. Did they, then, wish to forearm us

against the possibility of impoverishment, to prepare us for a lower standard of living? No again, for we were always being told that, in France, in spite of financial crises and increasing taxation, a well-managed fortune was bound to increase. The history of the family provided a proof of that dogma. The only other possible explanation was the idea, entertained by our parents, that so long as we were kept in ignorance of the precise size of the fortune which would come to us, it could be kept out of our hands and be left more safely in theirs.

I can still remember how oddly my mother and my father behaved when they submitted their accounts on my coming of age. What I had inherited from my grandfather, augmented by three other legacies, made up a portfolio which my father had taken it upon himself to administer. Very solemnly, my mother told me to sit down. She spoke like someone who can no longer avoid making a painful confession. Papa shook his head in a fatalistic manner. I was fully convinced that my little all was in grave danger, had, perhaps, been reduced to nothing. But far from that being the case, I was rich. Unknown to myself, I had become an heiress—and in the long run they had to admit it.

"But it's wonderful!" I said, more as a natural reaction than because the disclosure made me really happy.

My mother, in sour tones which I can still hear, said, "All things considered, it might be worse."

Then, thinking that once I had got over my first surprise I should probably express my gratitude, she deliberately cut the ground from under my feet:

"You have us to thank!"

But it is true that, even then, my mother was jealous of me. The knowledge that, from love of money as much as from honesty, she had made a fortune for her daughter, may well have brought sadness to her loveless heart.

Xavier's case was entirely different, and a great deal simpler. He possessed nothing of his own. This negative situation was no mystery in the family. But Aunt Emma was the penniless young man's godmother, and I knew her through and through. What she would not do from feelings of affection or generosity, she would do from pride and a desire for gratitude. Had she not, alone and unaided, taken upon herself to find the money for all those years in the mountains, first in one of the best sanatoria to be found, later in a comfortable chalet? Certainly she would continue with the good work. She would provide for Xavier. She wanted the munificence of kind Aunt Emma to be known and admired.

Why, then, all this plotting?

I knew absolutely nothing. But all through that evening the problem left me no rest. When, saying that I was tired after my journey, I went upstairs as soon as Aunt Louise had left—she always said good night before anybody else—I was still brooding over the mystery while I undressed, when I got into bed, when I put out my light. . . .

A moment later I was with all my family on the balcony. All the grown-ups were leaning on the balustrade. I was amazed that it did not give way under the combined pressure. How could I be expected to see? I knew that, down below, looking tiny in the deep gully of the street, a pro-

cession was passing, escorting some important personage who had just returned from a journey. Minute scraps of scattered paper were floating between the buildings. Such portions of this confetti as fluttered above my head were drifting into the house. I went into my studio to sweep them up, only to find that they were pigeons' droppings. I took advantage of my being there to go to the staircase. I ran down it without letting my feet touch the treads. I just put one hand on the banister and jumped from half-landing to half-landing. I kept on in this way. Down below, a bus was passing. One jump more and I was inside. My feet were bare, but nobody noticed that, and I was suspended in air a few inches above the floor. When the bus entered Twin Peaks Tunnel, I could see far ahead the patch of daylight into which it would emerge. As it grew bigger and bigger, I rose slightly higher above the footboards. That was why the other passengers were being shaken about, and I was not. When the bus ran out of the tunnel, high above San Francisco, my head was in contact with the roof. It was nice to look down on the city from there. I could see, all at the same time, my little Presidio, my Pacific beaches, and my bungalow in the mountains.

The smoke was rising straight into the air from its chimney, at the far end of the road, just where the two walls of white marble, carved out by the snowplow, met. My head bounced more and more rapidly against the roof of the bus, like a tennis ball on an upside-down court. Finally, I broke through. I had to press myself close to this chest, snuggle into the hollow of this shoulder. But the skin was too hot

and scorched my cheek. *Boom . . . boom . . . boom . . . boom* went my head.

I struggled back to wakefulness. The blood was throbbing in my temples. I had a temperature. My cheek was hot on my naked arm. Well, at least a good part of the night had gone and that was something. . . . I turned on my light. A quarter to twelve. I had been asleep for only half an hour.

No use switching off the lamp; no use trying to capture sleep. Sleep would run from me. It was the fever that would not, but would take me whither it willed. I got up. I would bathe my face in cold water. Had I still been in America I would have fetched from the icebox in my kitchenette the big glass of orange or grapefruit juice which I always put there to keep cold. Sometimes I used to find a thin skin of ice on the surface. I loved crunching the thin sliver, the frosted fruit.

But now I had but one resource, alike for mouth and forehead: water from the tap.

I used to be forbidden to drink it; consequently I always thought it tasted better than water from the filter. I could, of course, ring for a bottle of Vichy, or some tea. After all, it wasn't so late. But the idea of seeing one of their faces, or even a servant's . . . no, the tap it must be. But in order to make sure it would be cool, I had to let it run. I had to wait while it mounted to my room, climbing through all the floors of this great stocky building. Once again I had a material reminder of the size and complexity of this family ant heap.

The water was still not cold. I took an aspirin. I had some

left over from America, and liked to think that this special and superior brand could not be bought in France. Are not better pharmaceutical preparations to be found in the United States than anywhere else? Their sunburn creams, for instance—so effective and not at all greasy. A sort of aluminium-colored froth, a silver foam. True, over there you plastered your face thickly with the stuff. It was no uncommon thing to see, even among the ultra-chic college girls, a completely white nose. It was as though its owner were wearing a paper cornet, a carnival false-nose. That is one of the most delightful things about America—a complete absence of idiotic self-consciousness, utter frankness, unquestioning loyalty.

My aspirin was slow in taking effect. I went over to the window, after first turning out the light so as to see the Park better. There was no moon visible, but the mist which hid it spread a mysterious and diffused light over everything. The great stretch of lawn made a shallow hollow with nothing to break the smooth surface except a little hillock at its center, on which there was a grove of chestnuts. It was as though the cluster of trees, their branches caught in the fog, were holding up the grass carpet which lay stretched and undulant like a piece of drapery. When I was quite small, I used to dream of walking there in the darkness after all the people had left.

I had been told the history of the Park a hundred times. It was interwoven with that of my family, because, in 1852, when the property of the House of Orléans was confiscated, one-half of the Monceau estate had passed to the Municipal-

ity, and half to Pereire, the banker. He had noticed that certain parcels of his new land were overlooked by some property in Le Haut-Roule which belonged to the Boussardel brothers. Shortly their fortune took a decided turn for the better, and they acquired in exchange for the coveted property, the land on which eventually our home was built. But these details had become fixed in my mind only by dint of long repetition. I preferred others which I had discovered in an old book bearing the name of the great Carmontel himself, which formed part of the family archives. No amount of studying it could lessen my pleasure.

Thus guided I spent enchanted days wandering in the ancient "Folly." I visited the château, the nearby tower, and the calvary, which was an artificial ruin in the style of the Middle Ages. I preferred the Tilt-Yard to the Temple of Mars, the name of which rather frightened me. I made these things my own. I mounted the back of one of the fabulous peacocks which took the place of wooden horses, and lo and behold, the machinery still worked! I climbed down only when I had grown tired of going round and round, and wandered through the three geometrically designed gardens—one blue, one yellow, and the third, "rose-color." A winding path led me to the flowered water meadow, to the formal grove, to the aviary, to the Italian vine, to the chestnut arbor from which, in the words of the book, "one could dominate the whole of the surrounding country."

These pictures continued to enchant me. I found it easy to reconstruct them in my mind, but only at night. From a dark room into which I had secretly slipped, I could see

through the slats of the Venetian blind that there was nobody in the Public Garden. It was then that it recovered its vanished beauties, and especially its royal isolation in a country scene unsullied by the presence of any Boussardel.

3. *Norman*

I.

AND there I was again, as in the old days, behind my windowpane. Was it to be my fate to spend the rest of my life cut off from my dreams by an invisible and cold partition?

I felt that my fever had diminished. My pulse beats had grown slower. From one state I passed to another. When, in the car, Norman and I used to drive down from our mountains into the Victorville desert, or when we took the same

road back, we could feel with physical sharpness in our chests, in our ears, in our noses, the sudden change of altitude. Except when we were pressed for time, we always stopped once or twice in order to better acclimate ourselves to that sudden transition, and also, perhaps, to enjoy the moment to the full. On our way home, we would turn and face Lucerne Valley where the sun was setting in a riot of violent colors. We thought of the bungalow awaiting us, so close yet in a different world, thrust deep into the surrounding snow, as though by its weight and its warmth it had thawed a place for itself.

Twelve miles were enough in this direction to carry us to a height of nearly six thousand feet. Hurriedly we put on more clothes, changing as we drove. In a quarter of an hour we were surrounded by snow. It seemed to us as though the very silence, as primitive in the desert as in the snow, had altered, had changed its tone.

And now, alas, the sky which I had left behind me, the memory of those American days and of the young man made in their image, were plucking at my thoughts, forcing me out of my present self. . . . Caught between these nearer memories and those of my childhood, what had become of me? They were clamoring for my attention. I should know no peace, nor would the curtain fall, until the two chief characters had spoken their speeches.

So far, Norman has not played out his part to the end. It is now time to listen to him.

2.

THE architect with whom he had signed a contract, began by supplying him with a Ford. It was really a small truck with a station-wagon body. It could serve equally well for the trips which Norman would have to make, and for carrying the plans and material which he would need for his work. We first used it to carry us by road up into the San Bernardino Range. How Norman had explained me to his employer I did not know, but whatever his story, the man addressed me from the very first as "Mrs. Kellog," and was as friendly to me as to Norman. He did not ask to see our marriage license—in fact, nobody did, not even in the hotels where we put up in the course of the trip. That was another European notion which did not at all fit in with American ideas.

Over four hundred and fifty miles separate San Francisco from San Bernardino, which was our first objective. Though the Ford was broken-in, it was still strange to Norman, and we thought it better not to make the trip at a single jump. In order to avoid the road by Fresno, I made the excuse that it was monotonous, just a succession of long straight stretches which would make an unattractive beginning to the great adventure. Actually, the alternate route had the advantage that we had already driven along it, six months before, as far as Monterey. That was the direction we should have to take to begin with. But about noon, I noticed that Norman had forked left.

"Why not go through Monterey?" I said. "I should like to see it again, in daylight."

He slowed down only slightly, and, without a trace of a smile, replied that the coastal road was not so good. I dared not insist. I already knew Norman well enough to realize that certain forms of sentimentality annoyed him. But the main reason for my silence was that I did not yet know the extent of my power over him. Happiness was so new to me that I was far from feeling sure of myself. We drove on. I found consolation for my trivial disappointment in the knowledge that I had avoided making a blunder. I had yet to serve an apprenticeship in what I imagined to be the diplomacy of love.

I followed our itinerary on the map, reading out the names of the towns through which we passed. The proportion of English names to Spanish gradually diminished. The landscape, too, began to remind me that less than a century ago the country through which we were driving had been part of Mexico. We made our first stopover in San Luis Obispo.

"Two rooms," said Norman.

The ones they gave us communicated. He left me to choose which of them I preferred, but they were so much alike that I could easily have gone into the wrong one without noticing any difference.

Norman said good night and went straight into his own room. I stood motionless in front of the communicating door, not daring to turn the key on my side. I was a prey to the most contradictory feelings. All I did was to go into the bathroom to get ready for bed. When I came out, there

was no sign of Norman. I slipped between the sheets and lay trembling. Then I switched off the light.

Only broad daylight awoke me. It was seven o'clock. I was still the same Agnès I had been the previous evening. Of their own accord my eyes turned to look at the communicating door which had never once opened, as it could have done without making the slightest sound, during the hours of darkness, to admit a young man in pajamas.

I realized, however, that it was he who had awakened me. When he had parted from me, he had said, "Breakfast at half-past seven." I had gone to sleep with those words in my ears, and had obediently opened my eyes just at the right time.

I did not see Norman again until I met him downstairs in the hotel lobby. No sooner was I in his presence than I was amazed to find how embarrassed I felt. When he looked at me I felt that I was blushing to the roots of my hair. Why? Just because, for the first time in my life, I had slept within a few yards of him? Or was it, rather, because he had respected me?

Back on the road again, we drove all that morning. Not a word passed between us. And then quite suddenly, Norman broke away from his silent thoughts, and said, "You're so different from the others. It isn't so much that you come from Europe, as that you aren't the same inside as the girls at Berkeley. I know all about them, that they're easy to have, and I've had my share of them, but not often. That sort of thing doesn't interest me much. Perhaps I, too, am a bit different from the other boys. I just can't have a high opinion of girls who give themselves so casually, and think

they're not acting like prostitutes. I think they *are*. Maybe it's my Indian blood which makes me feel like that. I'm not a bit modern in my thinking, and I guess a good many people would laugh at me."

I made no reply. The turmoil within me was beyond the power of words to express. I forced myself to look at Norman. He, on the contrary, did not look at me but turned his face away. He drove on, and his profile above the wheel had much delicacy in it, yet also something animal.

It was at this precise moment, I remember, that I said to myself, "It would be sheer madness for me to give myself to him, but if I don't, I shall regret it all my life."

It was some time before we settled down to any sort of regular existence in the mountains. Before starting work at the lakeside he had to come to an understanding with the local contractors. The fact that we were living in the San Bernardino Valley would make it easy for him to establish these preliminary contacts, and the fine weather would facilitate our trips to and from the town and the holiday resort-to-be. Only some forty miles along a road blasted out of the cliff separated the two places.

Norman's employer was not due to arrive from San Bernardino for another month. Meanwhile, he was lending us the house he had rented at Highland on the outskirts of the town. It was charming, if old-fashioned, and built in good Colonial style. Yielding to what Norman called my "French mania," I had baptized it Le Fronton because of the triangular pediment, supported by four slim columns, which was the chief feature of its main frontage. The architect was to

spend the rest of the summer and the autumn there with his wife and children, while we would live at Big Bear at the building site.

The aristocracy of the valley consisted of several ranch-owners. This society dated only from the period when a reaction had set in after the Gold Rush and was, more than in most of the states, hospitable to strangers. Norman's boss had announced our arrival to two or three of the families to which he himself had been given an introduction. On our very first afternoon the Jeremy Farrishes asked us over, without more ado, for the week end. They went down, every Saturday, to their cottage at Laguna Beach on the Pacific Coast. Once more I had occasion to wonder at those outstanding American virtues of friendliness and hospitality.

Since it was a Friday when we moved in, Norman and I would spend only one night at Le Fronton. The incident at San Luis Obispo had made it perfectly clear to me what attitude Norman intended to adopt. Besides, the drive and the business of settling ourselves had left both of us very tired. Consequently, I was not surprised when, after our first evening, he said good night to me at the door of my bedroom.

But what would the morrow bring forth? We should be spending Saturday and Sunday nights with the Farrishes, and they, no doubt, believed we were married.

The situation was made perfectly clear to me as soon as we arrived at Laguna Beach. We were shown to the guest room. It contained twin beds.

"I hope you will like the room," Mrs. Farrish said to me.

I said I was sure I should. I had noticed how close to-

gether the two beds were. I had even glanced into the bathroom and noted that it was far too small to accommodate a mattress. In short, I had realized that I should soon cease to be a virgin.

We very soon saw all that was to be seen in the cottage. Its grounds commanded a beach to which one had access by a private stair.

It was only eleven o'clock in the morning. There was talk of going for a swim, but it had not occurred to me to bring a suit. The eldest of the Farrish girls, who was fairly tall, lent me one which made it possible for me to undress in her room.

But when I went down to the beach with her, I could not help taking a long look at Norman. He was already ankle-deep in the water. He was wearing the yellow trunks which I had seen on him in the Berkeley pool. His body was exactly like that of so many other American young men who are almost physically perfect but give the impression of being mass-produced. They seem young rather than virile, and are completely devoid of sex-appeal, infinitely less earthy than their brothers in France, though the latter can show a far less perfect physique.

Still, when I saw Norman again I could not keep myself from trembling. No more than thirty feet of sand separated us. There was a tightness in my throat. In order to postpone the ordeal, I pretended that a shell had got into my rubber shoe. I inserted a finger, lifting my foot and bending my knee. There I stood idiotically on one leg like a bird. I could not take my eyes from Norman's nearly naked body. The sight of our twin beds had given it an added significance.

It was only then that I fully understood him. Under Norman's kisses I had remained chaste. Since San Luis Obispo, since, more especially, Laguna Beach, I was so no longer. At that moment I should have seen no falsity in signing myself as Mrs. Kellog.

The whole of that day passed like a dream. I felt numbed by the heat, blinded by the sun, deafened by the violence of the breaking waves. The slope of the beach was so steep that the waves broke close inshore. Indifferent swimmers, like Mrs. Farrish, had to bathe a hundred yards farther on, where the remains of a breakwater had produced a silted bank of sand which was perfectly safe. The preceding summer had completely broken me in to the Pacific's roughness.

Nevertheless, about five o'clock the flow of the tide became noticeable, and the men took advantage of it to indulge in surfboarding, a violent sport imported, I believe, from Honolulu, in which few women take part.

Seated on the sand with my new women friends, I watched Norman, Charlie Farrish, and a number of other men wade into the water, each pushing in front of him a board of hardwood. As soon as they had crossed the bar, they lay face downwards on these makeshift rafts and, propelling themselves with their hands, made for the open sea. There they waited for a suitable roller to form. At last a suitable roller came. At once, they came alive, adapting themselves to its rhythm, pursuing it the way a circus-performer runs alongside his horse. Carried forward by the rapidly moving wave, they stood, their arms outstretched, and were carried marvelously to the shore, upright upon

the waters, shod with spray, for all the world like so many sea gods.

Watching Norman, I was very conscious of the adventure on which we had embarked, not in the least concerned with the perilous tomorrows which lay ahead of us. I had already noticed in him that peculiarly American tendency to be concerned only with the moment.

When Norman once again set off toward the bar, I plunged into the water and swam along at his side. I dawdled in that world of waves, finding it fun to fight against them, to keep myself from being carried to the beach. Suddenly I heard Norman shout a warning. He was driving straight at me on the summit of a huge roller, helpless before the mad rush of the advancing waters, unable to change the course of his board.

"Dive!" he shouted.

He was no more than four feet away from me. Desperately I obeyed him. The surfboard dashed over me like a rocket, striking me with brutal violence in the small of my back. I lost control of myself under the impact. For a moment the onrush slackened, and I dived again. Perhaps my head had been split open; perhaps I should die before the next wave reached me. Instinct alone kept me swimming. Norman must be far away by this time, but still I drove ahead. What brought me to the surface was the thought that he might be frightened at not seeing me reappear. I struggled back to light and air. I looked for Norman. Thirty yards or so behind me, his run finished, he was holding his surfboard upright. At sight of me he burst out laughing. Above the noise of the breakers, he shouted.

“That was a bit of luck!”

Then, carrying on with what he had been doing, intent upon his pleasure, he headed again for the open sea.

As I reached the shore and felt the ground beneath my feet, I found that my knees were trembling. I could still feel deep within myself the shock of the avalanche which had swept over me as though I had been a piece of drifting seaweed and left me almost lifeless.

I collapsed on the dry sand beside the two sisters who had seen nothing of what had occurred. I took off my bathing cap, but my ears, full of water, could not hear a thing. I lay down on my back to recover from the shock. I did not do any more swimming.

That was the night on which I became a woman. I was happy. All my difficulties melted away in the peace of this American house and the murmur of the ocean, in the knowledge that nobody was bothering about me, and with an almost disappointing sense of simplicity. I had expected to feel torn from my moorings. On the contrary, I found my mind playing with very simple ideas. As I pulled the blanket up to my chin, for we had left the window open, I was surprised that the night should be so chilly after the heat of the day.

I thought—strange to say—about my mother. If I had been married in Paris, as she had so earnestly hoped I would be, what complex emotions would she not have pretended to feel? To what motherly and hypocritical advice would she not have treated me? I could not help smiling to myself, as

I lay there in bed, at the thought that I had done very well without her help.

I was happy and I knew Norman was happy, too.

I could not go to sleep. I could feel the blood pulsing behind my ears. Its intermittent throbbing seemed to blend with the pounding of the ocean waves on the beach below. I was at peace with the world.

3.

THE life we lived together did not take on its true color until snow fell on Big Bear, and everything turned white.

Rows of cabins and bungalows, mass-produced, and assembled beside the lake, were already awaiting the arrival of winter-sports enthusiasts. Norman's duties were twofold, changing with the seasons. He had to see to the renting of the accommodations and supervise the running of the camp to which his labors had given birth. Under instruction from his boss he had constructed, overlooking the road, a dwelling larger than those in the rest of the settlement. This headquarters building was at once an information center and a comfortable home in winter for the superintendent—and his young wife.

It was a single-story affair, built in a grove of sequoia trees. The walls were of logs laid horizontally. The only piece of masonry was a chimney of great stones standing outside, where it looked like a square turret. Inside we had a sunken

living room, one bedroom, and the bathroom; to the left were the office and the kitchen.

I had asked to be allowed to arrange the main room according to my own ideas, and had even gone so far as to make some sketches. Norman examined these attentively.

"Pretty," he said. "You sure have good taste."

The compliment filled me with a sense of pride. Although I knew that Norman, like so many of his profession, was capable of making the most horrible mistakes about furniture and decoration, it didn't matter. That was not really the question. Besides, when he handed me back my drawings, he said, "The trouble is this isn't American. The people who'll be coming here wouldn't know what to make of it. It would give them a wrong idea of the bungalows."

I had no alternative but to face facts and let Norman go ahead. The log walls were adorned with the stuffed heads of bears and hung with crossed snowshoes and Indian rugs. The fact that these latter were obviously not genuine did not cause Norman the slightest qualm. A few college pennants and sports trophies added a personal note.

The fireplace and the traditional sofa facing it were both sufficiently vast to keep six persons, seated side by side, warm. This chimney corner alone occupied one whole half of the room. Struck by this lack of proportion, I commented on it to Norman.

"That's how it's got to be," he said.

I soon got used to this domestic setting. I recognized it for what it was—a replica of what one sees in films or American musical comedies.

Norman gave himself over to his new duties with unqualified enthusiasm. Like many of the Americans I had studied, he showed not only love, but respect for his work.

With just the same seriousness which I had seen him apply to his university studies, and later to his work as an architect, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to the keeping of "books." He would disappear for whole mornings. When my dinner appeared likely to burn to a cinder, I would run down to the camp by the lakeside, only to find him absorbed in some utterly trivial task.

Every morning he got up atrociously early, and now that winter was come, before it was light. When I grumbled, he said, "I've got things to do and morning's the best time for work."

Regretfully I left my bed and made him some really good coffee as a surprise.

"But why?" he said, when he saw it steaming on the kitchen table. "I could have done it myself."

"I know, Norman, but you wouldn't have made coffee like this. I have a way with coffee."

"You don't say? Some sort of a trick, I suppose. I always beat up yesterday's—that's my trick."

I was indignant. "Warmed-up coffee, indeed! Why, the stuff's undrinkable!"

"What a queer lot you Europeans are," he said.

As he sat sipping his coffee he looked at me over the rim of his cup. I was standing at the dresser, under the naked bulb which hung from a beam. In my wrapper, I was feeling chilled and only half awake.

It was at such times that the banal and ridiculous nature

of my adventure overwhelmed me. What was I doing in this bogus trapper's cabin, surrounded by snow, ten days' journey from my home, with a young man, a "two hundred per cent American," as he said himself, in whose eyes I was half goddess, half cook.

Norman went on: "Yes, you sure are queer, you people from Europe. You think we're childish and crude, and yet you attach the damndest importance to insignificant details."

"Do you call good cooking an insignificant detail?"

"Oh, that damned cooking! You all exaggerate its importance!"

I could not keep myself from answering—rather priggishly, I suppose—that the French had managed to turn a necessity into an art, and one that certainly wasn't contemptible.

"An art," said Norman coldly, "that can be enjoyed only for the time it takes to swallow."

That made me laugh, but only briefly. He had spoken with that dignified and enigmatic air which made me love him, and which brought out so clearly his true race.

I went behind his stool and put my arms around his shoulders. They felt hard to the touch through his flannel shirt. I leaned till my face was close to his, till I felt his freshly shaven cheek against mine.

A feeling of distress, vague but painful, came over me. I said, "Oh, Norman! . . . I wish . . . I wish . . ."

He had his hands upon my arms and pressed them slightly. "My darling," he said in a more considerate voice, "what is it you wish?"

I did not really know, but I was filled with a great tide of melancholy. But with Norman one had to be precise.

"I wish," I said, "that you would take me high up into the mountains, on snowshoes."

"I'd love it," he answered, "but why?"

"I don't really know. Perhaps just to be with you . . . you mustn't laugh!"

"I'm not laughing."

"You could do some shooting if you wanted," I added. "There must be lots of game about."

"Actually," he said, "it's more the season for duck."

One afternoon in January, while I was sweeping our front steps which a fresh fall of snow had buried, I heard Norman calling to me from the direction of the camp. Almost immediately a small village girl ran up out of breath to say that they were asking for Mrs. Kellog down by the lake. There had been an accident.

I lost no time in getting there, fearing the worst. A small crowd was gathered in front of one of the unoccupied bungalows, and they stood aside to let me go in. I found Norman dripping with water and steaming like a drenched horse. He told me what had happened. The son of a trout-fisherman over on the north bank had come across to sell to some of our visitors the fish his father had managed to catch through holes in the ice. But the snowplow had only cleared the road on the south bank, and the boy had taken to the frozen lake. Just as he had almost reached us, the ice had cracked. Norman had heard the child's cries. The boy was scarcely able to breathe and was sinking fast. Norman

had plunged into the icy water and brought back a limp little body. The lad's face was already blue from cold. I recognized him.

"It's Mike!" I exclaimed.

As ill luck would have it, there was no doctor among that week's batch of visitors. I turned the gaping onlookers out of the bungalow, keeping with me only Mrs. Potter, a kindly body who kept a soda fountain close to the filling station. I got her to make a big fire in the stove, and while I undressed the little boy, insisted that Norman strip off his own clothes, because he, too, was shivering. Wrapped in blankets, he soon grew warm again.

But while I was rubbing the still-limp child, I uttered an exclamation. Both his legs were broken. Should I ever be able to get the blood circulating, avert the danger of pneumonia and reduce the fractures? Faced by that task, and conscious of my responsibility, I was momentarily appalled. Then I looked up and saw Norman. The water had made his hair curl, and from under that tousled growth the man I loved was watching me at work upon the boy. There was admiration in his eyes. I don't mind confessing it was that expression of his which gave me the necessary stimulus.

After a while, Mike regained consciousness, and I applied the poultices prepared by Mrs. Potter. The fractures were compound, and I must decide something with as little loss of time as possible. There could be no question of getting in touch with the boy's parents. Any messenger sent across the ice would have run the risk of a similar accident, and to make the journey around the lake by road would have meant a four hours' walk through deep snow.

Norman, now dressed in dry clothes, no longer showed any trace of his immersion. If he had been surprised at my gifts as a nurse, I, for my part, was amazed at his powers of recovery.

"Are you all right?" I asked him.

"Right as rain."

"Well then, you've got to bring the Ford and drive me and the boy to Victorville."

To the small victim who, with clenched teeth, was waging a man's battle against pain, I said, "Think you'll be able to stand the journey?"

"Yes," he replied. Then, with a dignity which nothing could shake, "I trust you, Mrs. Kellog."

"Thank you, Mike."

Then I explained what I had in mind, as much for Norman's information as for his.

"I know they've got a radio transmitter at Victorville, as well as a small hospital. I am sure Mrs. Potter will put a call through, telling them that we are on our way."

"Sure, Mrs. Kellog," said the candy-woman, "and I'll send a message to his parents as well."

"You mean you'll send somebody to tell them? Don't forget it will be dark in less than two hours."

"I can signal them with lights," she said in high good humor. "Just you let me up on that there rock with a lantern, and I guarantee the old man and I'll understand one another."

"I think she's right," said Mike.

Mrs. Potter laughed. "Don't you forget I was born in these mountains!"

I was not surprised by her laughter. It served to relieve her anxiety.

The journey was long and slow. As far as little Lake Baldwin we did not have to bother about bumps. The snow-plow had not been able to get through to the solid earth, and had left a frozen surface as smooth as the snow walls on either side. We drove through an alabaster canyon in which all the light of late afternoon seemed to be concentrated.

We had taken the seat from the back of the car which was large enough to hold a good deal of freight, and replaced it with a mattress. The patient, who must have been suffering great pain, never uttered so much as a groan. I sat on the floor at his side, with a Coleman stove wedged between my knees.

At the top of the pass we stopped for a moment, for the difference in altitude was already noticeable.

"Look!" Norman said.

It was the magic moment to which we had grown accustomed. We were passing from one world to another. Below us, stretching into the distance, lay the desert. The last daylight filled the whole expanse with a reddish haze. A mist was already forming and hung, densely opaque, above the horizon. In the far distance, violet hills rose above this pearly sea like so many islands. There was not a sound, not a movement. In the west, toward the *cajón* road, harsh colors still lingered low in the sky, where the air was motionless and without clouds. The transition from day to night seemed to have stopped dead for a moment so lovely that we could have wished it to last forever.

Never had I felt so close to Norman. Never had I felt so happy as here, squatting on the floor of the car, one hand holding the hand of the injured boy, the other pressing on Norman's shoulder so that I could pull myself up to the level of the window. He had wiped away the moisture from the glass with his hand, and it was possible to see out.

It was time to continue the journey. We had become adjusted to the climatic change, and Mike's condition did not permit dawdling.

We began to descend toward the desert. It was sere, for the lupins, the verbenas, and the scarlet poppies of spring soon pass their prime and turn to barren sticks and stalks. It was certainly warmer though at these lower levels. Nightfall seemed to be a whole hour behind that in the high valley from which we were emerging. Snow and sequoias gave way to rock, cactus, and Joshua trees, dimly visible now in the twilight. By the time night fell, we were in Victorville.

As soon as the boy's legs had been set and he was settled in a hospital bed, I put through a telephone call to Mrs. Potter in order to keep her informed. As I had imagined would be the case, Mike's entire family was gathered in the soda fountain to learn all the more important details.

By the time we had eaten it was well after ten. I said I was too tired to return to Big Bear that night. But that was not the real reason. I wanted to postpone for as long as possible the resumption of our daily routine. I wanted to prolong, to extend, the wonderful moments that had been granted to me.

At the Anderson Hotel we were given a room on the second floor. I opened the window and leaned out. It looked

toward the mountains, invisible now in the darkness. Immediately below me was a typical American small-town main street lined with single-story buildings and lined with street-lights and pepper trees. Their tops were almost on a level with my eyes; their feathery leaves, lit from below, were within reach of my hand.

As soon as the bellboy had left the room, Norman joined me and put his arm around my waist. Neither of us spoke a word. I leaned my head on his shoulder. I sagged a little, to feel his arm supporting me and pressing me to him, that strong arm which had just saved a human life. The thought crossed my mind that I might have lost Norman, that his life, too, had been in danger in the icy water. I shivered at the open window.

Norman shut it. But he knew perfectly well that the reason I was shivering was not the cool night air. Norman, who in many ways was so innocent, Norman, who never showed himself a libertine in love, was still intensely susceptible to physical contact. He understood a look better than a word, and a touch better than a look.

He knew what I was thinking. Hand in hand we moved to the bed. I found myself lying there beside him, though I had scarcely noticed that we were undressing. Recently I had begun to take less pleasure in his love-making, but tonight I knew again the happiness I had experienced the first time we had slept together.

4.

LIFE at Big Bear resumed its normal course. Mike's accident had left very little mark on Norman. But I knew that nothing would efface the last hours of that day from my memory. Not even the snow which once again began to fall upon our mountain home could ever bury it.

I was, however, under no illusions about that experience. It had added nothing to our intimacy.

When Binnie Farrish, the younger of the two sisters, fell ill and was advised to convalesce in the mountains, she came to stay with us. I was only too glad to have a third person in the house.

"We shall love to have you," I told her at San Bernardino, when the subject was first mentioned.

She was one of those small creatures of seventeen whom the United States seems to produce in swarms. She faced life with an eager step and a serene expression on her face which may well have denoted an inner emptiness. Nothing took her by surprise, and I was forever finding myself amazed at the way in which she seemed always ready for anything.

The simplest arrangement was that Binnie should share the bedroom with me. It took my mind back to the old Berkeley days, and life in my sorority. Norman slept on the large sofa with a cushion behind his head and a rug over his legs. I often stayed with him late into the night. I would wait until he had stretched himself out, and then squat on

the bearskin in front of the fire with my back against the sofa so that Norman could put his arm around my shoulders.

I switched off the lamp. There was no light then in the big room except what came from the flickering flames. I stared at the burning logs until my eyes hurt. The heat reduced my whole body to a state of torpor. My head felt heavy. I poked the fire, prodding it to life as if in the hope that I could make it an ally who would protect us and keep the dangers besetting us at a distance.

Those were happy times. I, too, sometimes fell asleep until the cold woke me. The fire had died down until there were only a few glowing embers left, and Norman had drawn back his arms into the warmth of the blankets. I got up, feeling stiff all over, to throw more fuel upon the fire, then left its cheerfulness and the useless sleeper. I gave him a parting glance and felt my heart contract with misery.

One day Norman had to go into San Bernardino on business. Binnie, overjoyed at the chance of breaking the monotony of her life at Big Bear, and delighted at the idea of showing her parents how much better she was, went with him. Left to myself I settled down to my daily chores. Solitude, which I had once so eagerly sought in France, was far from displeasing to me, even now, in America.

The days were beginning to lengthen. When I had finished my work there were still two hours of daylight before me. I called the Farrish home and was told that Norman had already called for Binnie. I decided that I would walk down the road to meet them.

I walked for a long time. The snowplow had cleared the road, yet few cars passed me. There was no sign of the Ford.

I reached the dam which shuts the lake in on the west, and still had not seen it. The Redlands road being still impassable, Norman could drive back to Big Bear only by the City Creek road on which I was walking.

Feeling little inclined to go further, I sat on the parapet which looks down on the sluice gates. Behind me I could see the ravine: below, and on the other side of the road, was the ice-bound, snow-covered lake. On its banks a few trees made dark shadows against the general whiteness, which was intensified by the brown walls of a cabin in the foreground.

It was then, looking at the cabin, that I understood. It had been built between the road and the lake at a point from which the whole of Big Bear was visible. It was a favorite beauty spot. Every Sunday a hot-dog vendor set up his stand in the cabin, and even on weekdays tables and benches of rough wood and brick fireplaces were available for picnics. Close at hand there was a space for cars which did not, therefore, have to be left parked on the road.

Now there was only one car there—the Ford.

At first, I did not move at all. My mind was racing, and I had to get some shape into my thoughts. Norman and Binnie, having reached the dam, had decided not to continue on to Big Bear. They had parked the car, got out, and sat down on a bench which was hidden by the cabin, not in order to enjoy the view, which they knew well, but to delay their return to the bungalow and to me. I had taken them by surprise. I had only to walk forward a few cautious steps and I should witness their treachery.

But I did not stir. I was angry, bitter, hurt! But the thought

uppermost in my mind was that the whole thing was so inevitable that I had really no right to be indignant. How could I have been so wholly blinded by sentiment as not to realize that Norman's feelings toward me would not last? It was natural that the first girl to cross his path should restore the situation to what it had been before he met me. Binnie was, after all, an American as was Norman himself.

I knew only too well how different I was from these people. In a flash I saw before me my impenetrable grandmother; my self-satisfied brother; my crafty mother; a family trained in wiliness. . . . Had I really thought that I could ever break free from them and settle into the ways of a completely foreign people?

But, to some extent at least, I understood Norman. I could not honestly feel angry with him. I told myself that this flirtation with the Farrish girl, a rich heiress who could bring him a big dowry, would probably end in marriage when I had vanished from the scene. That would be a wonderful solution for him. It dawned on me at last that what had happened provided the answer to every problem.

I walked toward the cabin. The new fallen powdery snow did not creak under my feet. I could draw close without having to employ any humiliating piece of trickery. Besides, I knew them both. They would make no attempt to conceal what had happened. I could already hear their voices, though I was not yet near enough to make out their words. I had reached the corner of the cabin, was just about to reveal my presence . . . when a phrase brought me to a sudden standstill.

“ . . . the most *utterly fascinating* woman I have ever known.”

It was Norman's voice. I strained my ears. Binnie's reply was couched in much the same words. They were in complete agreement, but not in the way I had imagined. . . . Those I had thought to unmask were speaking well of me! I turned and fled like a thief.

Some weeks later Binnie was sufficiently recovered to leave for a cruise with her sister and some of their friends. I was left alone with Norman. It was then that the solitude we shared began weighing heavily upon me. Not a day went by but I discovered some new weakness, some fresh fault, in my companion.

That moment at the dam when I had indulged my baseless suspicions, had freed me at a single stroke from bondage to my illusions. I felt now that to resume those encumbrances would be too hard a task. I seemed to almost resent the fact that Norman had not been false to me.

The sides of his nature which I most had loved now repelled me. The attitude of solemn respect with which he treated his work made me lose patience. The priggishness which I had tried so hard to fight in my own character, I found in him. Briefly, I was rapidly reaching a point where I should no longer understand Americans.

When, having started off on a lonely walk, I climbed a slope from the top of which I could take in at a glance the swarming bungalows on the lakeside, or when, going down toward Victorville, I saw the desert unrolling before me, or

again, in some San Bernardino street while I sat waiting in the car for Norman who had business to do in the bank, and looked at the houses, the traffic, the people—I realized that all these sights which I had once endowed with so much richness and solidity were, in fact, utterly devoid of either, and that the objects about me had never been anything but mere façades, paper-thin.

The true symbol of the whole country was, I thought, to be found in my girl friends of the old Berkeley days, nine out of ten of whom, I had been amazed to discover, never wore any underclothing at all.

But even as I formulated these judgments, I blamed myself for doing so. I was furiously angry with myself.

And then, as the months passed, I grew less irritated. The manners and customs of those about me, which, when I first came to the United States, I had adopted out of curiosity, and later, under the pressure of my love for Norman, became, once more, my own. I looked for nothing in Big Bear now but Big Bear, nothing in Norman but Norman. I started to read a lot of detective novels and to smoke a great many cigarettes. I neglected the care of my kitchen. The days, or rather the nights, became more frequent when Norman's amorous ardors roused little or no response in me.

The end of March came at last. One morning the hard snow began to thaw, and thousands of little streams began to run toward the lake. The whole mountain was filled with murmurs.

For a week the roadways were a sea of mud. The high walls of packed snow still held out against the increasing warmth, but the passing cars dirtied them with mud

splashes. Everywhere the sun was digging great holes in the snow. Big Bear was fading away.

It was emptying, too. In the Victorville desert, as in the San Bernardino ranches, spring was beginning. Cars no longer turned up at the lake on Friday evenings or Saturday mornings.

Norman left me alone all day long. There was a great deal to be done. He had to see to tidying the bungalows and cabins and closing them for the summer. There would be no more tenants until the summer heat began.

Even Mrs. Potter shut up shop. She was going for a month to stay with a married sister at Long Beach. Norman offered to drive her to the train in San Bernardino. But when I saw her baggage piled into the Ford, I suddenly caught my breath and felt a premonition. It was as though I saw another woman also preparing to desert.

"I . . . I don't think I shall be able to go with you," I said.

"Why now, that's too bad," replied Mrs. Potter.

"Not feeling well?" Norman asked.

"Not very . . ."

I watched the bags disappear into the car. I saw Mrs. Potter settle beside Norman in the front seat.

I waited like a coward until he had gone to fetch one last package. Then I took a few paces towards my good friend, and grasped her hands in mine. My voice was trembling.

"Dear Mrs. Potter, I shall always have such happy memories of you!"

"What's the matter?" she exclaimed with evident surprise. "You don't mean I shan't find you here next month?"

"You most certainly will! . . . but good-bys are always good-bys."

"Why, Mrs. Kellog—you sure are romantic!"

She laughed, and then stopped, her eyes fixed upon my face. I lowered mine.

"I'd have you know that if I don't see you again, I too shall have very happy memories."

I kissed her. Norman returned.

"Forget all I've said, Mrs. Potter."

"Sure!" But she added in a low voice, "You must forget it, too!"

When the Ford had disappeared, I lacked the courage to go back into the bungalow. I turned off the road and climbed a short way up the mountain. I slipped about a good deal on the muddy path. The day was warm, and I had to unbutton my fur jacket. At last I reached the point from which I had so often looked down on the camp and the lake.

They had both changed for the worse. The snow had left only a few traces. I scarcely recognized this countryside, though I had made my first acquaintance with it the preceding autumn before the snows had come. I had lost Big Bear.

I did not stay long. The four walls of my home, within which I had found happiness and now would find only myself, frightened me less than did the landscape which had lost its magic.

I started to go down. Alas, I understood only too well what had happened! The thaw had marked a decisive moment. All that till then had been in suspense had now disintegrated, just as the snow had melted. I hated the green

shoots and the sound of running water. I cursed the spring.

For some time now I had been conscious of a new kind of uneasiness. I was terrified lest I might become wholly indifferent to Norman's embraces. I told myself that it would be much better to leave that house, to run away before the enemy could take charge. I knew exactly the nature of that enemy: it was an Agnès turned rebellious.

5.

ONE Friday evening when Norman came home for dinner, I said to him, "The days are warmer now, Norman. We haven't been to the shore yet. What do you say to our taking a week end off at Laguna Beach?"

"With the Farrishes, you mean? That's a grand idea. Why not give them a ring?"

"We needn't stay with them. Let's take a room at the Newport Club. It will be more peaceful there."

"Quite honeymoonish," Norman said with a smile.

Very early next morning the Ford took us down into the valley. As we drove through Highland I noticed a florist's shop which a Japanese boy had just opened. All along the sidewalk, he was putting out great bunches of flowers.

"Stop!" I said to Norman.

"For flowers? You want to buy some flowers? Who for?"

"Just because I want to."

I bought several different kinds and got the boy to make them into one huge bunch. At sight of me thus laden Nor-

man did not crack any jokes at my expense, as I had feared he might, but expressed his surprise rather differently.

"You're a bit strange this morning, darling."

"Strange? Because I like flowers?"

"No. Strange because you don't look very cheerful."

As usual, he was careful not to press the point. I said, "Do you mind if we go round by Le Fronton?"

He said nothing, but pulled up in front of his employer's house.

"At this hour on a Saturday he won't be awake; nor will she," was all he said.

"That will make our call the more tactful, Norman. I'll just leave the flowers with a little note."

The house was, indeed, still wrapped in sleep. I stopped halfway between it and the car, the flowers in my arms. The front of the building was bathed in soft morning sunlight.

It was there, after our first night of love, that Norman and I had, without a word, dropped into our habits of intimacy. It was there that fate had brought me through the first stage of my life as a woman—one month of perfect happiness.

I looked at the house which, for so short a time, had been our home. Never had I seen in it so much grace and beauty. Tiptoeing up the four steps, I placed my flowers upon the top one, in front of the closed door through which, last summer, "Mr. and Mrs. Kellog" had passed together.

Norman had said not a word, and we covered the distance to the shore without either of us speaking.

Taking advantage of that freedom which reigns over the

Pacific beaches, I came out of the Newport Club wearing bathing shorts and a halter. Norman followed me, almost completely naked, for he had on only his trunks. The sands had not yet been invaded by the summer crowds. A dozen or so girls and boys, no less naked than ourselves, were playing at ball or enjoying the first sun-bathing of the year. There were very few swimmers. Norman plunged into the sea enthusiastically, and called to me from the breakers to join him. But I preferred to wait until the heat of noon.

I sat on the car rug which we had brought with us, together with towels, a thermos, and some sandwiches. I never took my eyes off Norman as he came out of the water. I saw him again as I had seen him before, his wet body glittering in the sunlight. But between him and me were three boys playing at catch with a baseball. Norman at once became a fourth.

He was the most nimble, the strongest of the group. He achieved prodigies of skill. The weight and hardness of those balls are cruel on the hands. I knew that from bitter experience when Norman had been without a partner. He wore out the others one by one. In admiring voices they declared that he was "*terrific*." Several of the girls had drawn near and were watching his exertions. I had eyes only for him. I saw him now as I had seen him a year ago. I had come here meaning to leave him, instead, I had found him again.

The ball game ended for lack of participants. At last Norman came back to me. It was sweat now, and not sea water, that made him shine. He rubbed himself down, then

sat on the sand and covered his feet with the towel. It was then that he swore.

"Look at that!" he said.

He showed me a brownish stain on the sole of one foot. I was reminded of those French bathing-places where it is not unusual to walk on a deposit of tar washed up by the tide.

"It'll come off easily, with a little gasoline," I said.

He replied, not without reason, that he hadn't any gasoline handy, to which I replied that he could surely wait until the evening. But Americans have a horror of visible dirt. Norman picked up a shell and started to scrape away at the sole of his foot, grumbling the while: "Those damned oil wells!"

"The oil wells have nothing to do with it," I said, "that's tar from a fishing boat."

He proved to me that I was wrong. It was the derricks a few miles to the north, standing on the edge of the land, and sometimes in the sea itself, which had been responsible. He was sure of it. . . . I broke in on him with a smile.

"All right, Norman, have it your own way. It's all a matter of temperament, I suppose."

"What do you mean—temperament?"

"Just what I say. I prefer to think it's something off a fishing boat."

"Why?"

"Because it's more poetic that way."

He looked at me with amazement. "What *is* wrong with you this morning, *Ag'niss*?"

He had put one hand behind his back and was supporting himself on his outstretched arm. The position accentuated

the width of his shoulders and the smallness of his waist. At the same moment, two questions formed in my mind: "How can he be so beautiful?" and "Why can't he understand?"

I preferred to break off the argument. "I'm sorry, Norman—I expect I am a bit on edge. I slept badly." That was true. A five-minute swim would do me a world of good. As I got to my feet I stroked his cheek, a gesture which was not usual. I adjusted my cap, and ran down to the sea's edge.

The water was less cold than I had expected, and calm for the Pacific. Treading water, I could see Norman. He had not stretched himself out in the sun, but was squatting. I imagined that he was looking at me and thinking.

It was at that precise moment that an odd thing happened. The full meaning of my defeat suddenly burst upon me. When I came to the United States I had known nothing of love, not even known what it felt like to be in love. How should I have foreseen that, with Norman, I was headed for a dead-end? I am not talking about the possibility of our marrying. I had always known I should not marry without the consent of my family. No, it was the very nature of my love which, from the very first, had condemned it to failure. I had been too much obsessed by Norman's good looks, by his foreignness. There had been no deep inner attachment—and that meant that there was something lacking in both heart and mind. Also, as I had recently discovered, there was something lacking in our nights.

Norman had not possessed me; he had merely made me lose my way. . . .

Seeing me leave the water and walk up the short stretch

of beach, he stretched out on his back. How was I going to tell him what I could no longer keep from him?

It was for me to strike the blow. Lying there at my feet, he looked very vulnerable, stripped of all defenses, doubly naked. I dried my legs and shoulders and took off my cap. Norman made room for me beside him with what was, perhaps, an unconscious gesture, painfully reminiscent to me of our shared bed. He stretched out his left arm to make a cushion for my head. I lay against his warm body. . . . How was I going to tell him?

And then I found that I was speaking. I have always disliked long hesitations. The words came easily. They seemed to be the natural formulation of my thinking, the product of some secret fermentation which had been going on for months probably. The fruit, swollen with bitterness, was dropping unaided from the tree.

I did not at once give him my reasons. I thought it more "American" to first announce my decision, and to explain the practical steps I had already taken. I told him that I had finished my packing last evening. The bags were standing locked and strapped in the clubhouse and could stay there until he could send them on to me in San Francisco. He would have to drive me to San Juan Capistrano through which the main line ran to the north.

I had to force my voice to keep steady while I finished what I had to say.

"I took my leave of the lake yesterday. There is really no point in my going back."

There I stopped. My head was still resting on his arm.

Neither of us turned to look at one another. For a moment he remained silent; then, without moving, he said, "I see how it is . . . I understand."

"What do you understand, Norman?"

"Something I haven't been able to get clear."

I felt a prick of curiosity. "What is it you couldn't get clear about?"

"Why you left those flowers this morning at Le Fronton."

Though I had sworn to myself that I would conceal nothing, I could not bring myself to correct his mistake; nor could I explain that my flowers, which bore no card to show from whom they came, had been laid as an offering to a ghost.

We had not moved. The sun was becoming increasingly hot, and the boys on the beach had ceased their game.

Following Norman's example, I had laid the back of my hand across my eyes. Stretched there side by side we must have looked very calm, and almost exactly like the other couples all around us. I started to talk.

This time I gave him all my reasons—all, that is, except the one that really mattered. For I knew well that if only I had been able to sustain the mirage of those first months, everything else would have counted as nothing in the scale. The strength of my happiness had reduced the Boussardels to ludicrous proportions. I had not yet solved that particular problem, had not decided whether my mental and emotional disappointment had made me physically unresponsive, or whether, on the contrary, it was only because my physical urgencies had decreased that I had come to see clearly. But

I knew that the two deceptions each had had a direct effect upon the other, that my story was the very ordinary one of a young woman who has gone suddenly frigid.

But could I tell Norman that? I did not feel brave enough. I was still lost in amazement at what had happened to me. I was far from feeling proud. Fortunately, there were other less embarrassing reasons ready to my hand, and of them I could speak freely, thus avoiding the most important one of all.

Norman let me babble on. Just as I was beginning to feel surprised at his prolonged silence, and, having reached the core of my argument, was pointing out how well nigh impossible it would have been for us to settle permanently, he in France, or I in the United States, he took his hand from his eyes and interrupted.

"I'm sorry, but your head's been too long on my arm, darling. I'm going all numb."

I sat up and looked toward the horizon, filled with a bitter urge to laugh at myself. How clear it was that we had never really spoken the same language! And what had I done to remedy that situation? Nothing at all. I instead made it worse by clinging to my illusions. At bottom it had been far more my fault than his.

"Oh Norman!" I exclaimed. "Norman!" I let my head fall on his chest and hid my face in the hollow of that masculine shoulder where, in spite of everything that had happened since, I had learned to feel as I had never felt before. With my lips pressed to his skin I murmured, "Norman, I should find this parting less wretched if I could know that you didn't think too badly of me."

I raised my head, looking for his answer in his eyes. With that gentleness which his strength could at times assume, he pushed me away.

"Darling," he said, "I think it would be better for both of us if you went on talking to me as you were doing just now and didn't look at me. In that way we shan't be tempted to be sentimental."

He pulled me around, and settled me as he wanted. I lay now with my head supported against his side.

"You'll be more comfortable like that," he said, "with the sun in front of you." Then, without any sort of transition—"How should I think badly of you, *Ag'niss*," he went on, "for doing what you think is best for you? You thought the whole thing out before telling me your decision. I'll let you go, but my feeling for you won't change. All I can do is wish you the best of luck. We, over here, are like that—didn't you know? When the time for love is finished, we don't indulge in recrimination. . . ."

As I remained silent, he asked whether I had said all I wanted to say. I answered that I had.

"Then it's my turn. What I have to tell you won't take long." The pause he made was like a punctuation mark—"You see, *Ag'niss*, I always knew it couldn't last. You were arguing a while back that marriage would have been impossible. You don't have to persuade me. From the very first I realized that you'd never agree to being my wife. You may have noticed I didn't ask you. We're too different. That was one of the reasons why I loved you, but it was also the reason why I was bound to lose you. It was because of that, too, that I agreed to lie and call you Mrs. Kellog.

You certainly made it worth while. . . . But I knew where I was heading. What surprised me was that you never seemed to be worrying about the future."

"It would take a very long time, Norman, to explain all that was going on inside me—and it would be very, very difficult, as well."

"Besides, I think . . . when I turn you all over in my mind, French people in general, I mean . . . I am convinced that you will always be unintelligible to us, chiefly because you are unintelligible to yourselves."

He was speaking more and more slowly, more and more solemnly, as he embarked upon these generalizations:

"What you love," he went on, "is feeling that you French are a mystery . . . You cultivate that belief with the greatest care. . . . You never have as good an opinion of yourselves as when you believe that you are the playthings of unknown forces."

After saying this, he stopped. My head was still resting against his side. It moved to the movement of his breathing. But all the time he had been talking, his voice had seemed to be coming to me from farther and farther away. It was as though it were issuing from a mouth which had nothing to do with the body I had loved.

That body, at least, I had not lost. I could feel the pulsing of its life. I wanted to make that contact closer still and without sitting up I turned sideways so as to be able to touch Norman's skin with my lips. From the sun it had taken on a warmth, a smell, a taste—a reality which I did not recognize.

More and more *my* Norman was drifting away, giving place to a matter-of-fact weaver of arguments. *My* Norman

had withdrawn. He, no doubt, had gone back to Le Fronton. But in that retreat, far away from my attentions, he would soon dwindle into nothingness. Soon, like smoke, he would dissolve and vanish, but the memory of him would live on.

The waves were breaking on the shore. The sun had produced a state of lethargy in me. In fact, I was feeling well. Grief, I supposed, would come later; for the moment I was experiencing an extraordinary sense of peace.

My cheek stayed where it was, perhaps the better to imprint in my memory, now that our imperfect love was over, the almost absent-minded kiss with which I saluted that lovely body.

4. *Xavier*

I.

AFTER that there was a blank. Nothing more happened.

My last hours at Laguna Beach, the train journey, San Francisco, my preparations for returning to France, my three days on the Streamliner—I have no memories of them. I had lost interest in America. It was like a play which had gone to pieces as soon as the star had left the stage. That Saturday morning, and the sandy shore of the Pacific, had seen the end of Norman. He had disappeared.

It is logical that my first bout of insomnia in Paris should have brought him once again vividly back to me. I saw him again—but the scenes I remembered were too recent, the words he had spoken still echoed in my ears. The memories were less flattering to him than would have been those vague recollections which for women are the true enemies of peace.

From a minute recapitulation of the past, Norman's memory had emerged tarnished, and I was at rest. For how long?

I switched off my lamp. Through the curtains of my window a narrow band of gray light was heralding the dawn. It was widening already above the Parc Monceau, above Paris. Morning was coming on apace when I should be able . . . my lids grew heavy . . . to go out before noon . . . to walk through the streets . . . to make a visit that I had in mind . . . At last sleep came.

2.

I WAS out of the house by half-past eleven. I felt wonderful, not in the least tired. Presumably there are certain almost sleepless nights which rest the body more than does solid slumber.

My heels struck sharp music from the pavement. The sun was mild and hazy in the morning air. It was a day when I could feel that winter was now near at hand.

From the boulevards the remembered chestnuts of my childhood had vanished. They had been replaced with plane

trees which still showed a few leaves and all their fruit, some of which, hanging like small bells at the end of a string, would outlast the winter.

On I walked, and suddenly found myself opposite the rue Rennequin, where Aunt Louise lived. On the corner of the rue Rennequin and the rue Poncelet where they join the Avenue de Wagram she owned a big old-fashioned house. The building did not bring in much in the way of rent. It stood on the confines of one of the more luxurious districts, almost at Les Ternes. But it belonged by right to the Plaine Monceau.

The concierge assured me that she had not seen my aunt go out, so I climbed the three flights to her flat, rang twice and at once heard the quick clatter of footsteps on the parquet of the uncarpeted passage, and my aunt's voice calling, "Don't move! Stay where you are and keep an eye on the stew!" She opened the door. "I knew it was you, my dear!"

She was wearing a flowered cotton apron. I had caught her in the middle of her favorite pastime. Aunt Louise was an outstanding cook who never grew weary of exercising her craft. Her sister was forever waxing sarcastic at her expense.

"So you do your own cooking!—as though you couldn't afford a maid! Oh, I know what you're going to say—we belong to a class in which cooking forms a part of the education of every young woman. Pooh! I know how to cook, but that doesn't mean that I do my own cooking. I also learned all about hemstitching, buttonholing and darning, but I most certainly do not mend my own clothes! We are taught those things that we may be in a better position

later on to run a house and keep our servants from cheating us!"

"Poor Louise," my mother would say in honeyed tones, "after all, it amuses her."

Aunt Louise opened the door of her drawing room for me. It was cluttered with bric-a-brac, but I knew that each object in it represented some fond memory.

Aunt Louise, the youngest of Granny's children, has my father's features. But what in him is faded and bleak, in her is merely blurred by age. She resembles the Louis XV coverings of her chairs, in which the designs have slightly run, the colors dim, though there is still a precious quality about the fabric.

My aunt had married a penniless archivist. Her part of the family fortune had been much diminished by one of those rare pieces of speculation in real estate which had not turned to Boussardel advantage, with the result that she and her husband were no more than comfortably provided for. Not that they worried. It was the unfortunate woman's brothers and sister who felt, not regret at this change for the worse, but a sense of humiliation.

They used their resentment as a weapon against her husband. They had never wholeheartedly accepted this particular brother-in-law who was so unlike them that he preferred palimpsests to bookkeeping. They never employed his Christian name. He was "my brother-in-law, the curator," or, "poor Louise's husband." Louise seemed to regard him as the just measure of her deserts. As the family pointed out, though she might have made a brilliant match, she had "let

herself get caught up in a thoroughly foolish marriage." She could, thus, scarcely be astonished at their keeping her and her husband at a distance, and refusing them certain privileges. For, while this marriage could hardly be regarded as a family scandal, it was certainly a misalliance.

My uncle, too, by going as seldom as he could to the Avenue Van Dyck, gave the impression that he acquiesced in this sentence of ostracism. Now retired, he was engaged on a vast work of his own choice, a study of the French sub-dialects of Picardy, and used this very extensive piece of scholarship as an excuse for not attending the family dinner parties. Aunt Louise never missed them, but left early and trotted back, alone and on foot, to the flat where her husband was working under his reading lamp.

She was very different from the rest of the family. She had gentleness, understanding, real goodness of heart, and, when she was with someone she could trust, a curious and charming sprightliness. But I had always thought her too passive, too inclined to compromise. I blamed her for not frankly asserting her independence.

Yet she stands out for me as the only one of all the Bousardels who has achieved, or even come within seeing distance of, happiness. But fate has played an ugly trick on her. She has never had any children.

Scarcely had she sat down beside me on the sofa, than she jumped to her feet again. She opened the door.

"Mircille," she called. "Don't touch anything! Don't move the saucepan, and above all, don't take the lid off!"

"I won't, madame," a voice answered from beyond.

"Oh these girls!" said my aunt, turning to me. "None of them know what real cooking is . . . and as soon as they've mastered my secrets, off they fly!"

At last she sat down and seized my two hands. "Is it really true that the food in America is so terrible?"

"No, of course it isn't. People exaggerate. It is very wholesome."

"That tells me all I want to know!" said my aunt with a laugh. "It's as though I'd asked you whether Madame So-and-so is pretty, and you'd answered that she is very distinguished-looking! I know exactly what *that* means! . . . I hope you'll stay and dine with us?"

"There's nothing I should like better. I'll telephone to say I shan't be back."

At once the expression of my aunt's face changed, and she began a cautious retreat.

"You mean, you haven't told them already? They'll be expecting you in the Avenue Van Dyck . . . It might be better not to put them out. Yes, I'm sure it would, especially since you got back only yesterday. What could I have been thinking of! You shall come another time."

She had not changed. Yesterday, when the family had been "disapproving," she had crossed the room and come straight to me. That, for her, had been tantamount to throwing down the gauntlet to the assembled family. It would be a long time before she would get up her courage again.

"It's going to be difficult," I thought, "to get out of her the information I want." I had made up my mind, however, to achieve my objective, no matter how long it might take.

I had to submit to a veritable cross-examination. But Aunt

Louise carefully avoided any opening which might give me an opportunity of talking about the family. She had remembered that, with me, she was on dangerous ground.

I chattered away. To keep her from asking me about myself, I asked for news of my relatives. First and foremost, how was my uncle? He had not been present at yesterday's dinner.

"Heaven be praised," said my aunt. "Ever since he has been working for himself, it's as though he has had a renewal of youth. He is just preparing his first volume for the press. You did know, didn't you, that he has found a publisher? Now, he's spending all his time at the Bibliothèque Nationale. I often take the Metro about noon and go there myself, and we have lunch together in the canteen, like two students. But today he's coming back here. You'll see him."

The moment seemed propitious. I said, "And what about Xavier? They say he's been cured."

"And he really is, my dear. He is leaving the mountain villa for good. You know how careful Emma is. If she is letting him come back, you may be sure that there is no further danger."

"I suppose he'll be given Simon's old room?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," Aunt Louise said.

I allowed myself a short silence. Actually, I had not heard that Xavier was to live in the Avenue Van Dyck house. On the whole, I was pleased by the news.

"I can't help wondering whether he won't feel lost . . . even bored, unless, that is, he finds some way of occupying his time. . . ."

I waited.

"I think I heard that he was to study Law," said Aunt Louise.

I did not reveal my surprise any more than I revealed the embarrassment which this sparring was causing me.

"That's not at all a bad idea," I said. "He's a bit old, of course, but that may be all to the good. The studies will be less frightening; in fact, he may find it a good deal easier than a younger man."

"The more so since your brother Simon is going to supervise him."

Simon? This information made me feel doubly curious.

"To begin with," went on Aunt Louise, "he's going to get Xavier into Mortier's chambers."

So that was it! The veil of mystery had been torn aside. The family business had had dealings for a very long time with Mortier.

Aunt Louise nodded her head. "The Mortier practice is not just *any* practice."

Very true. They enjoyed a solid reputation. A practice specializing in Company Law. And there was no son to take over. Only an eighteen-year-old daughter who was definitely not a beauty. But the practice would be her dowry.

I meant to get to the bottom of this business.

"It's a pity," I said, "that Xavier's got no money to speak of. Otherwise there might be a fine future for him with old Mortier."

I could talk the Boussardel language when I wanted to!

"Xavier got no money?" exclaimed Aunt Louise. "That shows how little you know your Aunt Emma! She is his

godmother, and she has always given us to understand that she would settle a million on him when he marries. And then there's the possibility of a marriage which would make your cousin Mortier's son-in-law. It has been the dream of Emma's life. If he can bring it off, your aunt will double that figure. And that's not all. In that eventuality the rest of the family, I mean Mother, Théodore and your father will contribute a third million. Your brothers are agreed on that point."

I did not find this hard to believe. I switched the talk to her cousin, Julienne, whose last remaining daughter had married during my absence. But I was no longer listening. I was pursuing the train of my own thoughts.

For a long while the elder Boussardels had been keeping an eagle eye on the Mortier heiress. In my childhood I had heard them on more than one occasion deploring that the girl was too young for my Uncle Théodore's boys or for my brothers. She had been born most inopportunately. They had watched her slow growth with impatience and ill-humor.

But now, at last, she had reached marriageable age; and just at the moment when my family had found an eligible young man of precisely the right age. The time lost could be made up if only they played their cards well.

But it was not of my relatives that I was thinking now. I was busy trying to visualize Xavier, still unaware that he was to be but a pawn in this tricky game; Xavier, no more than a bit of useful capital in a business deal which every member of the family was prepared to push on by providing funds, because it was in their interest to do so; Xavier who

must abandon his mountains and come down—down to where the Boussardels were waiting.

3.

AUNT EMMA struck the table with the flat of her hand. "I wish all of you to listen to me for a moment!"

Though she had talked unceasingly through the first half of the meal, my aunt was now the object of every attention. Having captured all eyes, she made her announcement:

"I want to know which of you will come with me tomorrow to meet Xavier when he arrives at the Gare de l'Est."

"I shall only be too glad to go, Emma dear," my mother said.

"Thank you, Marie, I am deeply touched."

My mother produced the melancholy smile of one who, alas! can never do as much as she would like to.

"Yes . . . deeply touched. Who else?" continued my aunt.

Papa raised his head. "Do you really think it essential that I go?" he asked.

At once my mother intervened harshly. "Nobody has suggested your going, Ferdinand—but is there any reason why you should not? I can't imagine that you have a prior engagement tomorrow—at five o'clock in the afternoon. . . ."

"I'll go," said Simon.

My aunt pretended to be surprised. "But that's wonderful! Wonderful! I think that will be enough—just the three of us."

At this point I piped up. "If I didn't think I might be in the way, there is nothing I should like better."

My words seemed to hang in the air. Everybody present, except Granny, turned to look at me. Then my mother and my aunt exchanged glances which I took to mean "What can have come over her?"

Eventually Aunt Emma gave her answer: "Far be it from me to discourage you from taking part in a family duty. No, since it is your wish to come, let us take it as settled. But now that we are to be four, it will be necessary to have the limousine."

Simon announced that he would be going direct from the office to the station. I took advantage of this to say, "I shall make my way there myself."

"You won't, then, give us the honor of your presence in our conveyance?" said Aunt Emma. "That, I feared, would be too much to hope for."

My mother sighed, and shook her head. I took the trouble—though why I don't know—to explain that I had a fitting at three.

"What! another new dress?" my aunt said.

"Yes: all my things are two years old. I must have something decent to wear for the party you're giving next week. Haven't you told us it's to be a very important affair?"

"If I give a reception to welcome Xavier's return to our midst, you may be sure that things will be done properly."

"Will there be a great many people, Aunt Emma?"

"What a question!"

I had annoyed her!

* * *

"Only just in time!" Aunt Emma cried when I joined her, my mother and my brother on the platform. "Suppose the train had come in before you had turned up!"

I glanced at the clock. We still had a good five minutes to wait, to say nothing of the fact that Simon, who had gone off to consult the information board, now returned with the news that Xavier's train was a quarter of an hour behind time. It was cold; we stamped our feet. I suggested that we should take refuge in the refreshment room. My aunt gave a start.

"Can you see your mother and me in a café? You must be mad!"

"I really believe," said my mother, going one better, "that I should not know how to give an order in a café!"

I indicated that in Simon we had sufficient escort, and that anyhow, a station refreshment room could scarcely be called a café.

"I was forgetting . . . you, of course, know all about such subjects. You are a great traveler. But I would have you know that I, too, have been in foreign parts, and more than once! I have visited Geneva, I have visited Brussels. The only difference between us is that I went for the galleries, not the cabarets!"

In a rage I went off alone to the refreshment room.

I emerged at the very last moment, and as I crossed the station hall looked to see whether a further delay had been announced on the board. My relatives were red nosed with the cold, stamping their feet to try and keep warm.

At last the train drew in.

"Follow me!" my aunt ordered. "We must not be separated!"

She walked briskly along the still moving line of coaches. Simon had to check her, since otherwise she might have led us too far. By this time the train had come to a halt, and the passengers were beginning to get out. We hunted in the crowd, but without success. Little groups, already making their way toward the exit, passed close to us.

"Oh dear . . . oh dear!" Aunt Emma babbled. "Not a sign of him! Suppose he's missed the train! Suppose there's been an accident!"

I hoisted myself on my toes and scanned the scene. Finally I caught sight of a tall, thin figure, in a light-colored overcoat, following at the heels of a porter. Not being sure that it was he, I said not a word to the others but started off in pursuit. I caught up with the stranger. "Xavier!"

He seemed to come out of a dream, stopped short, and turned on me a pair of deeply sunken eyes. He was not at all pale. Indeed his face showed the effects of eleven years spent in the mountain air.

"I'm Agnès, your cousin."

"Oh!" he exclaimed softly.

Then he broke into a smile. I went close to him: "Aren't you going to give me a kiss?"

Without a word, he let me take him by the shoulders. I felt the touch of his thin face against my cheek. I pressed my lips to it and drew back.

His smile grew broader. "I recognize you now," he said, and returned my kiss.

"The others are hunting for you, over there."

I pointed in their direction. It was Simon who first noticed me. While they came hurrying toward us I turned again to Xavier. He was looking at me, still smiling. He said, "I hope you had a good time in America."

But already Aunt Emma was upon us, and instantly took possession of him and began to pour out a stream of words.

Once outside, I could not bear the thought of driving from the station with the rest of them and having to endure the spectacle of Xavier at his godmother's mercy, compelled to answer her questions. There was no room for Simon in the car, and I suggested that I should go home with him.

I watched the family limousine draw away from me. Xavier, seated between my aunt who was still talking, and my mother, did not look at me.

Simon was driving himself, and I got in beside him. He uttered a few words to which I made no reply, and then, with his habitual indifference, he left me to myself.

I expected a great deal from Xavier's presence in the house. A very short time had passed since my return, and an even shorter time since that sleepless night which had both relieved and burdened me, and I had a feeling that my cousin would prove helpful to me. With an eagerness at which I was surprised, I found myself turning to him. I scarcely knew Xavier, but I wanted his friendship, in return for which I silently offered him my affection and support. I was not going to allow the family to sacrifice this Daniel who had come down into the lions' den.

I do not know how much of the defensive campaign I was sketching was pure selfishness. Was my object *really* to

protect this defenseless young man who knew nothing of the dangers besetting him, or did I just want to annoy my relatives? . . . I suspect the feeling uppermost in my mind was a longing to have something, somebody, I could cling to.

I had no opportunity to go into action during the first few days after Xavier's arrival. The very next morning he set off for Fontainebleau, where his uncle, his aunt, and all the cousins on his mother's side were living.

"Stay with them until the day of the party, dear boy," Aunt Emma had said. "Then you can give the whole of your time to us, and be a true Boussardel."

While he was away, she gave herself over entirely to the joys of preparation. She had the suite of "reception rooms" thrown open.

The suite, which occupied the whole of the ground floor, consisted of the picture gallery, two drawing rooms, the dining room, the billiard room and the library. These rooms showed a riot of ornament which surpassed even that of the exterior. Everywhere a flood of gold surged up the walls, drowned the cornices, and sprawled across the ceilings.

In preparation for the party, Aunt Emma had thrown the entire suite open. It echoed with the orders she issued to servants and cleaners. The carpets were taken up for dancing, the furniture was moved, and the whole floor began to ring with my aunt's shrill exclamations.

But at the far end of the suite of rooms was one place not touched by this sudden awakening. This was the Winter Garden, long out of favor and now partly abandoned.

Its great expanse of glass rose between the north wing and the house next door. Nobody ever went near this conserva-

tory except the gardener, who had gathered in it a small but pretentious botanical collection.

The Winter Garden was always silent, warm, and heavy with the moist smell of growing things. There was something else, too, about it—the sense of an unknown presence. Within a few seconds after you had entered the place, you got the feeling that somebody was hidden whom you couldn't see, but who saw you.

Sometimes, as a little girl, I used to slip in there just to have the terrifying pleasure of feeling frightened and taking to my heels.

4.

FOR the party my mother donned one of those spectacular garments which only she could find.

All the female members of my family over the age of fifty dress badly. Hopelessly behind style, they *could* have picked on dresses which would have been, at least, logical. But no: they patronized the leading *couturiers* because they felt they were expected to spend money on their wardrobe. But they inevitably added fancy touches which were entirely out of keeping with the style they had made up their minds to adopt.

"It will add an air of distinction," they would say to the saleswoman who, knowing only too well with whom she had to deal, offered no objection.

My mother's obsession was colors. For the "great occasion" she had chosen a quite pretty dress. But when she saw

it on the mannequin, she decided that it lacked brilliance. She could not rest until she had added a great flowing train of deep crimson velvet brocade. Thus distorted, the ensemble looked as though it had been designed for a bourgeois fancy-dress ball.

As a finishing touch she had donned her emeralds. They were very beautiful but extremely large, and heavily mounted in old-fashioned settings. Granny had given them to her as a wedding present.

The unexpected result of so many colors was to tone down my mother's naturally harsh complexion, and emphasize her fine shoulders. For one evening my mother looked a great deal less plain than she usually did.

I came down early to help receive the guests. When I entered the rooms, already blazing with lights, and ran into my mother, I stood for a moment astonished by the improvement in the appearance of this woman whom I knew so well.

I was suddenly startled into remembering where I was, and took hold of my feelings. My mother, too, was studying me intently. I drew myself up, pulling in my stomach that I might show my bust to advantage, but carefully because I did not want it to be thought that I was making a self-conscious effort. I knew that I was looking my best, that my new strapless dress flattered me. The yellow orchids which I had chosen made a dramatic patch of color halfway between the lime-green of the satin and the sun-tan of my skin.

From our mutual inspection, I knew that renewed animosity would be born. Each of us, looking at the other, had

been surprised. Of this we must have been aware. I had left girlhood behind. But in doing so I had not drawn any closer to my mother.

It was Aunt Emma who put an end to my thoughts.

"What a strange dress, my kitten!" she exclaimed. "Perhaps a shade too old for you, in my opinion, but . . ."

With more than her usual vivacity, my mother finished the sentence for her:

"It suits Agnès very well."

Before the first guest arrived a sort of preliminary reception took place. The members of the family had all received the same invitation as everybody else but, by a scribbled note, or by telephone, had been asked to come early. All had obeyed, and the first of the guests would find themselves greeted by serried ranks of Boussardels. There were sixty or seventy of them, of all degrees of relationship, only children under sixteen having been excluded from the evening's festivities.

All the members of the family came forward to do Granny homage. Each approached Granny, bowed, touched her hand or leaned forward to receive a kiss on the forehead, then withdrew to make room for the next. The closest kin came first in the procession, followed by the numerous more or less distant Boussardels. Some of them I did not even know by sight.

But there was no sign, as yet, of Xavier. In response to a questioning glance from Aunt Emma, Simon left the room and vanished into the gallery. There was a long period of waiting, but at last Xavier appeared.

I dreaded, on his account, this first contact with the Bousardel tribe at full strength. So many strange faces could be a shattering experience for one who had long consorted only with the mountain herdsmen. . . . But I need not have worried. With a smile on his lips he made straight for his great-grandaunt, and standing in the middle of the floor, said, as though to explain his lateness on the scene, "I'm afraid I have quite forgotten how to wear evening clothes."

The ensuing silence did not embarrass him in the least. Aunt Emma took possession of her godson, pressed him to her funereal bosom, and then introduced him to all the relatives who had not set eyes on him since he was a child. He let himself be led hither and thither, murmuring, as he accompanied her, "I spoiled two shirts. I couldn't help laughing. If it hadn't been for Simon . . ."

"Yes, yes, of course," Aunt Emma said, "but everything's all right now . . . don't give it another thought."

These words awoke in me a new feeling of resentment. She was talking to Xavier as though he were a child, or a puppy who had to be kept quiet.

At last Xavier broke away from her and passed down the ranks of the family as unconcernedly as though he had been alone in the room. Then, standing in front of the glass over the mantelpiece, he laughed heartily.

The temptation was too strong to resist. I walked across the room to my cousin. Without any fuss or bother, I undid his tie, which had been tied all askew, and began to knot it afresh. There we stood, face to face. I could feel that everyone around us was looking, and that pleased me. I was certain, too, that Aunt Emma was making caustic remarks

about my manners and my skill in arranging gentlemen's ties. But I did not care.

When I had finished, Xavier looked at the result in the glass and said, "A real masterpiece!"

Then his expression had become once more serious, and he turned toward me. It was as though for the first time he had noticed my dress, my bare shoulders, my hair. I dreaded a conventional compliment, and had already opened my lips to head it off. But a change had come over Xavier's face. His blue eyes deepened to gray, and that smile which, on the station platform, had charmed and yet vaguely disturbed me, appeared once more. As though speaking to himself rather than to me, he said, "You are much more beautiful than I had remembered."

It was not long before the Mortiers were announced. Granny had been taken upstairs, and Emma, as her eldest daughter, was now receiving the guests, assisted by her sister and sister-in-law. A footman suddenly entered the room and whispered something in her ear. I heard her pass on the information to my mother:

"The Mortiers . . . I'll look after them. Please take my place for a minute, Marie dear."

Aunt Emma disappeared, and I soon noticed that Simon, too, had vanished. I looked for Xavier but could see no sign of him. I passed into the large drawing room, where dancing had already begun. No doubt about it: my aunt had arranged for a private meeting between my cousin and the lawyer's daughter.

"Do you know Monsieur and Madame Mortier by sight?"

I asked the footman in the Hall who had spoken to Aunt Emma.

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"Where have they gone?"

"They are upstairs, mademoiselle."

I could not see them in any of the rooms which had been set aside for the bridge players and the smokers. "Can she have taken them in to Granny?" I wondered and made my way to the door of her room, opened it, and looked in. The little group was standing in front of Granny's chair. Aunt Emma was presenting the visitors.

"And," Aunt Emma added, "this is Anne-Marie Mortier, whom I am sure you remember, Mamma. . . ."

I was witnessing an event of some importance. The drowsy old lady managed to nod her head and to produce a smile. She stretched her two arms to the girl, drew her to her, kissed her on the forehead, and opened her lips. . . . Was she going to speak? . . . There was a general air of expectancy. In my grandmother's low mutter, two words were distinctly audible:

"Dear child. . . ."

Aunt Emma straightened herself. Her eyes were shining. Simon, too, was smiling. The Mortiers were profuse in expressions of respect. The girl could find nothing to say, and Xavier's mind seemed to be elsewhere.

"And now," said Aunt Emma, marshaling her visitors toward the door, "and now, let us leave her to get some rest."

We made our way back to the party where I said good evening to the Mortiers.

"Why, Anne-Marie," I exclaimed, "what a perfectly enchanting dress!"

"It is nice, isn't it?" she said, not doubting my sincerity. "I got it from Hermine Legrand—an exclusive model, you know."

If Xavier had not been present, she would have told me how much it had cost. This was a woman to warm the heart of any true Boussardel.

We went downstairs together. I noticed how small she was compared with me, undersized and already growing stocky. Her dress, an atrocious muddle of tulle, did not make her look any slimmer.

She went on: "I always think it so much wiser to go to one of the really big houses. Where do you get your things, Agnès? You're looking very attractive."

"In a different way, though, Anne-Marie—I haven't the advantage of your eighteen years."

She gave a self-satisfied smile. "I'm sure," she continued, "that Hermine Legrand could do just as well for you . . . especially if I gave you an introduction."

"Do you really think so?"

"Certainly I do . . ."

"I should be delighted if you'd take me to see her someday. . . . Shall we have a glass of champagne?" I led her toward the buffet. Xavier was not with us. "I must confess that after being away from Paris for so long, I feel a bit lost. I've a lot of shopping to do, and I need expert assistance."

I handed her a glass. The stumpy creature sipped at it with that air of social competence which never left her.

"I'd be only too glad to be of help," she said. "I'll turn you back into a real Parisienne, you see if I don't. . . . Tell me, Agnès, are the things one hears about America true—that the women's clubs are so powerful . . . honestly? . . . and is life as expensive as they say? What does one have to pay a good lady's maid in New York?"

After that I took no further interest in the party. For me it was nothing but a succession of dances. I passed from one pair of male arms to another, without the slightest feeling of enjoyment. I could see Xavier in the distance dancing with several young women to whom he did not seem to be speaking a word.

Nothing in the setting, the music, the guests, and—especially—the young men, reminded me of the parties I had known at Berkeley or San Francisco. There I had had all sorts of fun, and had been entertained in young men's rooms. The company might not have been "chic," but there had reigned that free and easy atmosphere which, in America, seems to characterize duties as well as pleasures. Brought back, almost without transition, to this ball, I felt as though I had traveled thirty years into the past.

I kept close tabs on the clock. By two, fewer and fewer men were asking me to dance. Without being churlish, I fear I did nothing calculated to bring my partners back for a second experience. I began to feel tired of all this mob. I tried to find some place of refuge in which I could hide without being guilty of the rudeness of going to my room.

At last I went into the library. There I found something

very like peace. It could be reached only by crossing the dining room. In this distant part of the house the music was less strident and there was very little dancing. It was in the library, with its chocolate-colored paneling, that the young girls allowed themselves to indulge in the delights of flirting with the sons of lawyers.

Two or three such couples had politely risen to their feet at my approach. I made them sit down again, pretending that I had some business or other at the far end of the room. In one corner, behind the wooden staircase which led to the upper gallery, was a high tapestry curtain, behind which stood a glass-paneled door. It was through this door that I vanished.

I found myself in the Winter Garden. It was a corner of the house in which nobody took the slightest interest, where no Boussardel was ever tempted to go. It was even less likely that any of the guests would make use of it. The only illumination was a solitary bulb. In the course of time this light had become weak and reddish, and the shrubbery which masked it made it dimmer still. Consequently, there was beneath the glass roof a sort of artificial dusk, a lifeless half-light with no movement in it.

I walked down the central path in the direction of the rockery. I knew that, at the far end, beside a miniature pond, I should find three wrought iron chairs which nobody ever used.

"Who's there!" I exclaimed.

On one of the chairs a shadowy figure was sitting motionless. . . .

Then I heard Xavier's voice.

"I never thought that my presence anywhere would frighten you."

"I thought I was alone . . ."

"Are you sorry to find that you are not?" he asked. He sighed. "*Ugh!* There's too many of them! Do you realize, Agnès, that the last time I danced was up where I've just come from?"

"In the mountains?"

"Yes, in the house of some friends I had made, a family of farmers who had invited me to the wedding of their daughter."

"It must have been a very different kind of dancing."

"Not very. The only real difference is that my friends danced a good deal better."

There was a brief silence. I found it easy to think of Xavier in those alpine pastures with woodcutters and cheese-makers.

"Wasn't that quite a ways from Davos?"

"Yes, thank heavens, very far. In winter it takes three hours in a sled to get there."

"I don't suppose you made the journey often?"

"Never. Sometimes I went down as far as Clavadel. That was as much of an effort as I could manage." He laughed softly, then became serious again. "I preferred to go climbing on the other side, towards the Ducanpass. But those names mean nothing to you."

"Oh! but they do!"

In the half darkness I could feel that he was looking at me attentively. His forehead caught a little of such light as

there was, but I could not see his eyes. I went on: "There's one thing I'm sure of, that you never felt bored."

He made no answer to this—obviously I had guessed rightly. We did not have to explain ourselves to one another.

"I suppose you were living with the local people," I said. "Did you share in their work?"

"Do you know, it's an extraordinary thing, Agnès, but you are the first person who has talked to me about all that. Are you trying to win my confidence?"

"No, just asking you the questions that happen to interest me."

That was true. He continued, "And yet, Agnès, we don't know one another very well. . . . I spent most of my time looking after the animals, I've apparently got a gift for that. I often used to help with difficult calvings. In summer I followed the herds, and sought the coolness of the high pastures. I spent whole days up there without going down. I slept with the herdsman in his hut. We lived on coarse bread which was sent up from the valley once a week, and cheese which we made ourselves. I took nothing with me, neither books nor cigarettes: nothing at all. I was completely happy. It was in that way that I learned from the herdsman the legends of the Canton, and its songs, too. I'll sing them to you someday."

I wagged a reproachful finger at him. "Xavier . . . I think you're homesick!"

"Do you?" He put the question as though I knew better than he did what was going on in his heart.

"It would be easy enough for you to go back."

"When?"

"Whenever you like. You could always use your health as an excuse."

"I'm afraid I couldn't: you see, I'm cured."

"Don't be a child, Xavier! You're of age, and your own master."

"But," he said more slowly, "my godmother has plans for me."

"Really? What plans?"

Had he already been told of the proposed marriage? And would he so soon confide in me?

He said, "There's some idea of my studying Law. I started doing a bit while I was in the sanatorium."

"But why on earth should you go back to being a school-boy at twenty-three?"

"It'd be difficult to get out of it. My godmother seems to think it necessary. So does Simon—and I gather that the whole family is in agreement."

"Except me!" I said, speaking more warmly than I had so far done. Though I must admit that my opinion had not been asked.

"It's all very difficult," he said again.

This was the first time I had seen him yield to his weakness—inertia. It was a blemish, a touch of childishness, which gave a sort of pale charm to this young man for whom I had already found a private name: Little Boy Lost.

"I think we ought to be going back," he said; "it'll be time for the buffet soon."

But we did not move. No doubt he had been thinking about that word "homesickness," for he suddenly asked me a question:

"After two years in the United States, you must have some very happy memories. I suppose one can be homesick for them?"

"Xavier, there is no country in the world for which one might not have a sense of nostalgia."

"I expect you made a whole lot of friends there . . . one especial friend perhaps?"

What a surprising creature he was!

I answered him in a low voice: "Yes, Xavier . . . one especial friend . . . perhaps more than a friend. I'll tell you all about it someday."

I said no more, and he too stopped talking. The music came to us distantly, as though it were being played in another house. I remembered that of all the evil spells which I had connected with the Winter Garden, silence had always seemed to me to be the most frightening. And yet here I was, enjoying that very silence. And with a newcomer in my life, a young man about whom, a week ago when my heart had been filled with Norman, I had never even thought.

There could be no question of my falling in love again. All the same, I had begun to feel concern for someone other than myself.

I parted the curtain and was about to re-enter the library when I noticed several small supper tables set up in it. The billiard room and the dining room had both been invaded in the same way. Waiters were moving about, and here and there guests were busy organizing their parties.

Xavier was behind me. I grabbed his arm and brought

him to a stop, at the same time letting the curtain fall. We were imprisoned in the tiny space between its folds and the door of the Winter Garden.

"It would be better for us not to go back together," I said, softly. "That would only attract attention. For all we know, they may have been looking for us."

This whispered council and our hiding-place, made me smile. I reached for the knob of the door behind me, but so cramped was the space that I had to hold onto Xavier's shoulder and lean against him. I stood there and murmured, "Go through the Winter Garden, and out by the door at the far end. It leads into the pantry passage. If anyone asks where you have been, say you went up to your room for a rest."

"I can't say that."

"Why not?"

"Because it wouldn't be true."

I bit my lips, but thought it best to argue my case. "Surely it would be a very white lie?"

"I shall say," he went on, "that I was bored, and came here thinking that half an hour alone would refresh me."

"Because that *would* be true?"

"You know it would."

I could not stay as I was indefinitely, and he must be finding me a somewhat heavy weight. I turned the knob of the door and, letting go of Xavier's shoulder, straightened myself. His shadowy form moved back across the dark threshold of the Winter Garden.

He pressed my hand and vanished up the path. His footsteps made no sound. . . .

I saw no more of Xavier that night until the last of the guests were leaving. He had had supper with Anne-Marie Mortier at a table made up by his godmother.

As soon as the last of the guests had departed, Aunt Emma began congratulating herself on the party's success.

"*Ouais!*"—her voice rang out like a trumpet blast—"I think I can say that nothing went wrong."

"My dear Emma, it is easy to see why. You kept an eye on everything."

"By the bye, where has Xavier got to?" Emma asked.

"Here he is," Simon called from the gallery. "We're having a smoke."

"Come here, dear boy!" Aunt Emma cried.

Xavier appeared, obedient to the summons. His godmother pressed him to her bosom before them all.

"The hero of the hour!" exclaimed my aunt. "I hope you are pleased? If this evening has not provided you with a brilliant introduction to the social world, then I don't know brilliance when I see it!"

At last, everybody had gone. There remained in the Hall only the triumphant organizer, with my mother, my uncle, my father, Xavier and me.

"Now for bed," Aunt Emma continued. "Agnès, I will send the lift down for you."

"Thank you," I replied, "but we'll walk up, won't we, Xavier?"

My aunt was shocked: "What a strange idea! You must have been conserving your strength!"

"Ah, youth, youth!" said Uncle Théodore. "When I was

their age, I did not know what fatigue meant! I would stay up all night when out shooting."

But then the gates of the lift shut on all four of them, and I was left with Xavier.

We went up without hurrying. By the time we reached the second-floor landing our relatives had vanished into their rooms, and the lift had gone down again. The footmen had extinguished all the downstairs lights. The house had lapsed into its former silence.

There was nothing left for me to do but say good night to Xavier, whose room was on this floor. To reach my own, I had one further flight to climb. I had to support myself on the banister. My feet hurt me, which was only to be expected for I had done a lot of dancing. The evening, nevertheless, had been far from disappointing to me. In spite of my weariness, I was happy for the first time since coming home.

5.

LOOKING down her nose at the shopgirl, Anne-Marie Mortier demanded that we be shown into a room where we could wait undisturbed. This was a great boon to my plans. I had carefully planned things so our visit had taken place before luncheon, when there was little likelihood that an establishment like Hermine Legrand's would be crowded.

The lawyer's daughter was taking her role of guide and

counselor very seriously. Since the night of Aunt Emma's party I had had to accompany her to a concert—for she fancied herself to be a great Bach enthusiast—as well as to a particularly dreary tea party, where, according to her, we should meet the finest women of "our set."

But we had become really intimate—if I may be forgiven for using that word—only some three days before our appointment at the dressmaker's. The Mortiers had asked all my family to a big dinner.

It would have bored me to death had it not afforded me visible proof of the efforts they were making to impress us. They lived in a large but dark and cluttered apartment at the corner of the rue Francois Iér and the rue La Trémoille. As they showed us through the apartment, I realized that what really irritated me, what made me so anxious to upset the apple cart, was not so much that my family was handing over Xavier, bound hand and foot, to the Mortiers, but that the Mortiers were so devastatingly like the Boussardels. . . .

"We wish to see your evening dresses, Mademoiselle Edmée," Anne-Marie was saying.

How could such a talkative, worldly little creature, so much older than her age, possibly understand Xavier or understand his strange personality? . . . But I was to be given no time to pursue my thoughts on the subject.

"Stand over there, Agnès, with the light behind you. A person always looks better that way: your defects don't show. . . . I've been telling my friend about that Florentine dress, Mademoiselle Edmée, I should so much like her to see it. . . . Where are you going for winter sports this year, Agnès?"

"I really haven't given the matter a thought."

"Why not the Arlberg? I know you'll think there'd be no one you know there, but that doesn't matter a bit. I wouldn't tell this to everyone, because the place would soon be invaded. But with you it's different. . . . I was there last year with Mamma. I suppose you'll be going on your own?"

"Yes, or with friends. My mother doesn't like to be away from Paris, and my brothers are married, so . . ."

"Up till now Mamma has always gone with me. Not that I mind—on the whole I think it's better that way. I'm no prude, but really, young men do behave so strangely. . . ."

"Do they?"

"Indeed they do! It's not hard to see that you've been away from Paris for the last two years! My dear, at tennis clubs and winter sports, even at parties, we girls have to be *very* careful, believe me!"

"But, Anne-Marie, I should have thought it depended on how a girl behaves."

"Oh, it does, of course! I can assure you that with me the young men are always perfectly correct!"

I had only to look at her to believe that! Her final words, however, spoke volumes: "But, you see . . . well, the women they run after! One can't help seeing *them*!"

At this moment the mannequins appeared.

"That's the Florentine dress, Agnès. What do you think of it?"

It was a flimsy and pretentious affair, dotted all over with bunches of flowers and fussed about with ribbons.

But, having found someone to listen to her, Anne-Marie could not long stick to the subject of clothes. "And what

about Easter. . . . You have some property at Hardelot, I believe?"

"My brother has a villa there, if that's what you mean. He inherited it from his first wife."

"Really? Oh, look! that's the dress I wore at your party. . . . I should think it must be bitterly cold there at Easter?"

"It certainly is," I said, "and in any case, those northern seaside places are not considered very good for me."

"Why? Bad for your nerves, I suppose . . . I *do* like that pink, it's lovely!"

"Yes, isn't it? . . . It's not my nerves; the climate's not good for delicate lungs, and I'd rather not run any risks."

"No, indeed, you can never be too careful—" She broke off, but only for a few seconds, after which she went on: "Is there a tendency that way in your family?"

"Not exactly . . . though perhaps Valentin . . . I lost a baby sister after a bad attack of pleurisy. That is strictly between you and me, Anne-Marie."

"But . . ."

"You know how people exaggerate. Actually, *my* branch of the family has suffered very little in that way. . . . Couldn't we see some afternoon frocks?"

"What about your cousin, Agnès?"

"Which one? Xavier?"

"Yes."

"What about him?"

"Does he, too, suffer from . . . this tendency?"

"He is completely cured now."

"Cured?"

"If he hadn't been, he wouldn't have come back."

"Where from? Switzerland?"

"Yes—Davos."

"I don't think I understand. The name I was told was different—some village."

"True. For the last three years he has been living in a chalet in one of the nearby valleys."

"But before that? Was he actually *in* Davos . . . in the sanatorium?"

"Yes, Anne-Marie."

There was another silence, which Anne-Marie finally broke. "I never knew that," she said.

At luncheon on the following Saturday both uncle Théodore and Aunt Emma were missing from the table.

"They are in Sologne for the shooting," explained my mother. "They went off this morning with Simon, and he's going to bring them back." Then, in honeyed tones, she added, "Would you have liked to go too, darling? . . . But of course you wouldn't . . . you hate shooting, don't you? You are too sensitive."

"Is it a big party?"

"About a dozen . . . business acquaintances . . . people you don't know. Oh, but I was forgetting—your friend Anne-Marie's father is to be there. Your uncle hadn't seen him for some days, so he asked him down."

"When are Uncle Théodore and Aunt Emma coming home?"

"Not before Monday, perhaps not then."

As it turned out, they returned Sunday evening, obviously highly upset. With my brother at their heels, they went

straight to Granny's room where my mother, whom they had obviously telephoned, was waiting. The conference was long and drawn-out.

Alone with Xavier in the drawing room, I did my best to conceal my impatience. He was lying on the sofa, staring at the ceiling, and obviously unaware what was going on, though it concerned him greatly. His innocence acted upon me as a stimulant. He was so vulnerable! Who would protect him if I didn't? I was so much better versed than he was in Boussardel ways, and so much more used to fighting them.

At last the door opened and the family filed in. A glance was enough to tell me what had happened. My aunt's and uncle's faces were gloomy. Clearly, the Sologne air had not done them much good. There would be no stories this evening about the triumphs of the chase.

The crisis continued to develop out of my sight. Only a few indications reached me, like ripples on a muddy stretch of water which betray the presence of vast upheavals in the depths.

One day the next week, as we were drinking our coffee, Aunt Emma turned to Xavier.

"What are you doing this afternoon, dear boy?" she asked.

"Agnès and I thought we'd go see the Vuillard Exhibition."

Aunt Emma vigorously stirred the coffee in the bottom of her cup.

"Would it be all right if I were to come with you?"

I looked at her in amazement. She detested picture galleries and museums. "They tire me," she would say.

Today, however, she ordered the limousine. I knew some scheme was brewing, but she did not give herself away at once. We had toured the entire Exhibition without her having delivered herself of any pertinent remarks save her comments on the works.

As we left the Jeu de Paume, however, she turned to Xavier. "Ah," she said, "it's really not at all cold! Come have a cup of chocolate with me at the cake stall."

It was her firm opinion that any open air eating-place, whether in the Tuileries or the Bois, could be safely patronized by a lady.

We sat down, with Aunt Emma between Xavier and me. She gave her order, and then abruptly turned to her godson, and made a great show of examining him from every angle. "You know, I don't really think you're looking well at all!" she burst out.

Striving to listen without seeming unduly interested, I asked the waiter for a crust of bread, and made a show of scattering crumbs for the sparrows and pigeons.

"It is just as I always feared!" my aunt said. "In Paris you are breathing bad air all the time, and there is nothing better for you to do than wander about the house like a soul in torment. I don't mean that you are a nuisance! But what is there for you in this sort of life? That's what I ask myself. I know that we have spoken of your reading Law. But there's no hurry. Besides, what's going to happen to you when you have finished your studies? I don't see how we can find a place for you in the family practice. Both your

uncles are still hale and hearty, thank God, and one day Simon will succeed them. There is plenty of time in which to think about your future, so the less we fuss and bother about finding you a good job, the better it will be. . . . Besides, I know you so well, dear boy. You have never said anything against the Law as a profession, because you love us. But honest and truly, you do not think much of the idea, do you? . . . You see, your godmother still understands you better than anyone else. . . . Let us drink up our chocolate while it's hot, my dears. Who wants another cake?"

She took a deep breath, then plunged on.

"What then shall we do with you? It's a real problem. I don't like the thought of your going back to that mountain wilderness. If you do, people will think you are still a sick man. For all we know, your prolonged stay may already have caused talk. And how can one ever prove to people that they have been wrong in cases of this kind? No more mountains for you, that's settled. But what then? Well, dear godson, I have an idea. How would you like a vacation at Cap Baïou? I don't suppose you remember Cap Baïou, eh? It is on one of the islands of Hyères. It was left to me by Grandmamma Clapier. When your uncle Théodore was given the Sologne property, I was given Cap Baïou. Frankly, it is not the sort of place where a woman like me, who likes to have her family about her, would choose to live. After my father's death, I seriously thought of burying myself there for the rest of my life. But man proposes, God disposes. Mother felt very much alone in the Avenue Van Dyck, and I did not have the heart to abandon her. Besides, in those days, reaching the island meant a two-hour sea

journey, and I am terribly susceptible to seasickness. . . . So, briefly, what I am proposing is to make you a present of the place. It is very healthful—much more relaxing than the Riviera. You love solitude, and believe me, you can have your fill of it there! There is a house which I have always kept in repair, a good, solid, old-fashioned building with almost a half mile of land along the sea's edge. So, you see, you'll have nothing to complain about. . . . There now, I have had my say. Go there whenever you like, stay for a week or so, and if you like what you find, the place is yours for good! You will have all the sun you want, and can live there all year round without feeling that you are being a burden on anybody. . . . Doesn't that seem to solve everything?"

It most certainly did. The fact was, they had not so much wanted to marry Xavier off as to marry him to Anne-Marie Mortier. That plan having failed, he had become a dead-loss. It would be a long time before as good a match for him would turn up again, or one that would justify the investment of three million francs. His future looked far from promising. It was thus typical of my relatives to have made the discovery that he was finding it difficult to acclimatize himself in Paris and to have used the discovery to justify their sending him away.

Xavier, with his usual docility, had accepted the fact that Cap Baïou would turn out to be delightful. He saw the possibility of happiness in so out-of-the-way a spot. Within a week he set off.

Soon it was as though Xavier had never existed. The way

in which I accepted his departure, the ease with which I resumed the even tenor of my days, should have been sufficient proof that I was not in love with him.

It was proof, too, despite all my mental protests and physical revolt, how truly at home I felt among the Boussardels.

5. *Marriage*

1.

MY family's attention which had been momentarily switched to my cousin, was now centered on me again. They always had to have some family problem, but never more than one at a time. My case now once more appeared upon the docket. I would catch them furtively eying me. At my approach conversations would be broken off. Aunt Emma, incapable of keeping anything to herself, gave the whole thing away as usual.

But I did not inject any spitefulness into the protective measures I took against their attacks. The whole business was of far less interest to me than it was to them. Perhaps I had already re-absorbed enough of the family atmosphere to understand their fears of my contracting an unsuitable marriage. Perhaps, too, the trick by which I had scuttled the Mortier maneuver had cost me an effort which left me with little interest for these present skirmishes.

And perhaps the fact that I had made them bite the dust—though they didn't know it—was victory enough, so that I could now watch their intrigues with amused detachment.

Consequently I did nothing, which could have led them to suppose that I might really have gotten married over in the States. As for Norman, I had come to terms with his memory.

And so it was that my family appeared to feel less uneasy on my account. My quiet life—for I went out very little—reassured them. The weeks went by. It seemed less and less probable that the rebellious daughter would spring a Yankee husband on them. No, though their fears on that score had been acute, they were passing. And I let them pass.

Instead of replying sharply to Aunt Emma, as I would have done only a month before, I merely smiled when she would say something like: "It seems strange, my kitten, that after being so reluctant to leave America, you should have so few contacts with it. Nobody seems to write to you from America."

In statements of that kind, as in the more devious queries of my mother, in the endless shooting stories of my Uncle Théodore, and in Granny's grunts, I could no longer see

either sense or intention. They were no more than the animal noises of my species, the purring whispers with which I had been familiar since childhood.

2.

AN EVENT was on the way, however, which was to demand all the solidarity of which the family was capable, one of those events in the presence of which all personal jealousies and rancors suddenly disappear.

Jeanne-Simon had reached her time and her delivery was not proceeding as expected.

At first nobody was much worried. My little sister-in-law was a beginner. As yet she had not taken her place among those Boussardel women who seemed formed by nature for motherhood, expert in producing children with the minimum of fuss and with no complications.

But as day followed day and nothing happened, there were signs of alarm. It was remembered that Simon's former wife, the present one's sister, had died in childbirth. That disaster had not occurred until her third lying-in, whereas this was the first. I don't think that I am being unfair when I say that, in my opinion, my brother was more concerned as a father than as a husband. By what clauses in his second marriage contract he had thought to protect himself against the financial disappointments which the death of his first wife had caused him, I never really knew. But I was left in no doubt that the anxiety felt by my relations had more to do with the hoped-for infant than with the poor victim, the

powerless intermediary between the living but imprisoned fruit of her womb, and the in-laws who were already laying claim to it.

From day to day, the obstetrician in charge grew more reserved in his prognosis and less willing to give an opinion. As yet, Jeanne had shown no indications of labor, and symptoms had made their appearance which gave rise to the gravest forebodings. But as the moment of crisis approached, the number of relatives calling at Simon's small house grew larger. Each new postponement brought its contingent. First came the immediate family, then the cousins, then the more distant connections.

They packed together in a tight crowd. The Judge and his wife, Jeanne-Simon's father and mother, gazed with astonishment at this human mass. At first it had seemed to them to be lacking in discretion, but the larger it grew, the more it impressed them. "What a devoted family!" said the Judge several times a day. "What a devoted family!"

And indeed, nobody listening to the questions put by these visitors, to the low-voiced conversations, or seeing their faces, could possibly have suspected them of hypocrisy. They were all perfectly sincere. The presence in this house, at one and the same time, of imminent death and impending life, brought out the best in them. It would have caused them genuine pain to stay home while this drama of birth was being played out in the Place Malesherbes. The secret of the family's ability to resist and survive in difficult times, as they well knew, lay in its power of reproduction. To be sure, these same persons witnessed, without the least feeling of pleasure—on the contrary, with envy and grumbling—the

success of some at the expense of others, the enrichment of one of the family at the price of another's ruin. On those occasions their faces showed ugly through their masks, and those who said, "What a terrible misfortune!" were secretly thinking, "There is still some justice in the universe!" But in the presence of birth, of death, and of both in company—ah, that was a very different matter!

Hélène-Valentin and Aunt Louise formed a reception committee on the ground floor and issued the latest bulletin to the more distant relatives who did not expect to be asked upstairs. Aunt Emma, in the middle of a fresh attack of her liver complaint, and therefore doubly tortured, acted as liaison officer between floors, stopping now and again on the stairs, with her hand pressed to her side.

"Not a word!" she would say to those who expressed sympathy. "What do *my* troubles matter?"

She suffered, in addition, from the knowledge that she could do nothing to help. She was an old maid, and her only sister, Louise, had never had any children. Emma was completely ignorant of the mysteries of childbirth. She was not even admitted to my sister-in-law's room, into which my mother and Hélène, in the intervals between the doctor's visits, sometimes slipped. Aunt Julianne was permanently installed there.

Yes, it was by Julianne that Aunt Emma now saw herself superseded; by that same Julianne at whom she was forever carping. But Julianne was the midwife of the family. Five children, all living and all fathers and mothers in their own right, she had helped into this world, and with the arrival of new grandchildren year by year, her prestige steadily in-

creased. Few were the Boussardels, however distantly related, who had not come into the world without benefiting from her advice and her help. It was at such times that she came into her own.

My mother did not leave Simon's side. They sat together counting the minutes and the hours, united by anxiety and fear more closely than my mother could ever have thought possible.

She scrabbled at the bedroom door. Aunt Julienne, clad from head to foot in white, looked out: "The specialist is just leaving, Marie. You can have a word with him."

In due course he appeared, to be surrounded, besieged.

"No, the moment had not yet come to intervene. Tomorrow, perhaps. . . . No, the use of forceps would not be sufficient, in which case . . ."

Into the silence fell the dread word which none dared echo . . . a Caesarean.

Another day without any progress. One after the other the visitors took their leave. They huddled together on the wind-swept Place Malesherbes. Exhausted by anxiety, they saw the life of the outside world from a new angle. They crossed the Place on foot, "a walk would help them to pull themselves together." They thought of the poor young woman in her lonely bed from which, almost certainly, she would never rise again. The horror of what was happening doubled, multiplied, the farther they got from the house. It was far worse than an ordinary death.

It was late in the evening when the surgeon's two assistants arrived, bringing with them an additional nurse. The rela-

tives downstairs had packed into two rooms after imploring not to be sent away. Some dozen of us remained in the dining room on the first floor, for we had been turned out of the drawing room because it was too near the "operating room." No one was paying the slightest attention to Jeanne's mother, and I sat beside her, holding her hands. After a few moments Aunt Julianne emerged, looking very pale.

"They didn't want me to stay," she said. "All I was allowed to do was to administer the chloroform."

"Did she take it well?" asked Simon.

"Yes, she was very brave."

"Dear God!" Jeanne's mother said, trembling all over.

After all the comings and goings, the groans and cries which had periodically reached our ears through the wall, silence had fallen. An uncanny silence which completely took possession of the little house. It was then that Valentin suddenly, and most unexpectedly, began to cry. I remembered his delicate health, his sensitiveness. I remembered too, I don't know why, that at fifteen he had been a good-looking boy.

He sat there sobbing until finally his wife took him into another room. Several of those present blew their noses. There was something illogical, something that seemed to have no rhyme or reason, about this gathering. The nocturnal hour, the persons bunched together in the several rooms, their emotions—the whole setting seemed to be on the point of falling apart. At this precise moment, when the question no longer had any relevance, Aunt Emma said, "Have they everything they need?"

"Of course they have," said Aunt Julianne, who was still

wearing her white smock. "You should just see it! A real operating room—sterilized sheets—the bathroom prepared. Take my word for it, those men know what they are doing!"

Simon could no longer stay still. He strode about the room, gnawing at his mustache, and talking to himself in an audible whisper: "I don't understand . . . no, I do *not* understand. . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders in a gesture expressive both of confidence and powerlessness.

A muted sound, the sound of a sliding door being pushed back, came from the ground floor. My brother, troubled though he was, paused.

"What's that? The carriage entrance?"

"Ferdinand," my mother ordered, "go and see."

When my father returned, he told us that it was Granny, who had come with Francisa in the limousine. She had insisted on having the car driven in under the archway and had given instructions that the heavy door should be closed behind her. There she would wait, not leaving the car but muffled up, motionless and speechless, her feet on a warmer.

There was a long pause. Nobody else spoke. Then Aunt Emma rose from her chair. All eyes followed the direction of her gaze. The drawing-room latch moved softly, the door opened. One of the assistants slipped into the room, closed the door behind him, and leaned against it.

"Well?" exclaimed several voices. "What news?"

"A boy," the assistant said. "And alive."

My mother, in a transport of joy, pressed Simon to her bosom: "My boy!" she exulted. "My boy!"

And then, I saw my mother, for the first time in her life, shed tears.

"But what about *her*—what about *her*?" chimed in the Judge and his wife.

"There is still hope that we may save her."

Aunt Julianne gripped him by the arm. "I don't hear a sound from the child!"

In her anxiety, my mother released Simon. The young man in white half opened the door. "Listen!" he said.

From the next-door room there came a sound like a cry of anger.

In the small hours of the morning hope reigned. Having nothing to do, but being loath to go to bed, I went into my brother's study. It was empty. In spite of the cold I threw a window open to get some air.

Below me, I could see the distant members of the family beginning to emerge. Then the limousine moved out and slowly crossed the pavement between two hedges of spectators. The men tipped their hats, the women bowed, saluting the old lady who was now a great-grandmother for the second time.

The groups re-formed. The relatives could not bring themselves to leave. In the icy dawn they still hung about the house. Again and again they regretfully exchanged good nights.

THE news brought by Uncle Théodore caused consternation in the family.

You will remember that my maternal grandmother had been twice married. Her name was Noémi, and she was the last of six children born to my great-grandparents.

I had scarcely known her. She had died shortly after my seventh birthday. Across the years I could remember only an immensely old lady in a heavily trimmed old fashioned dress. She had had nine children. So insatiable had been her maternal urge that, though a widow with four children, she had longed for more and had remarried. Of that second marriage had been born my mother, three sons, and Aunt Julienne.

These two successive marriages had been considered the family's great dynastic disaster. They had opened a delta into the sea of "outside" families. The Boussardel-Bitzius fortune, of which only one-sixth had gone to my grandmother, had been again divided. My mother, the only one of the children who had succeeded in making headway against this disastrous tide, had, by her loveless marriage with my father, managed to ally herself with the sounder line.

Her half-brothers and half-sisters were never referred to except collectively and disparagingly. They were "the Gouilloux," that being the name of my grandmother's first husband. There had been no definite break with them, because nothing had occurred to produce one. All the same, it was

not in their branch of the family that the true Boussardel virtues were to be found. They were neither stockbrokers, notaries, nor solicitors, but engineers, industrialists, barristers—honorable enough professions, but barely so.

Still, my parents were not prepared for what Uncle Théodore now told them, in great detail, about my mother's half-nephew, François Gouilloux. The news was broken to us as we were taking coffee after luncheon on the Thursday when my sisters-in-law brought their children. On this occasion, Aunt Julienne had been invited too, as a small tribute to her devotion.

"Just fancy!" said my uncle, "This very morning François turned up at the office. He wanted us to put through an important market operation for him. I cannot disclose either its nature or its extent, but when he had given his orders, he asked to see me. You won't believe what he told me."

"What?" Aunt Emma said. "You are making me terribly curious!"

"He is planning to change his job—bettering himself, he calls it. He is giving up textiles—but what do you think *for?*"

Aunt Emma could not contain her curiosity: "What is it he's going to do?"

"He is going to become the manager of a factory!"

"And what sort of factory is this he's going to manage?"

"A plant which processes animal pelts."

After the first stupefied silence there was a rapid volley of exclamations. Aunt Emma's voice could be heard above the others declaring loudly that the whole thing was disgusting.

My uncle consented to enlighten the company.

"When rabbit skins are not of sufficiently good quality for use as fur—"

"Imitation fur!" Aunt Julianne interjected. "They *treat* them. The hair is used in the making of felt, while the actual skins go into the manufacture of gelatine."

"*Ugh!*" Aunt Emma exclaimed, thus expressing her distaste at the nauseating news. "More and more repugnant! . . . And will François have to deal with the skins?"

"I expect so. The commercial processing of animal carcasses is a highly profitable industry, carried on on a very big scale. But how anyone can take on a job like that is beyond me!"

Aunt Emma raised her yellow hand at the end of its crepe sleeve. "Where it comes to making money, the young people of today have lost all sense of shame."

Try as I would, I could not refrain from saying with a smile, "Aren't you being a bit severe?"

"Naturally!" said my aunt. "I should be extremely surprised if we were not! All I hope, my dear, is that when you pay a visit to this factory, you will see to it that you do not bring its smell home with you!"

My mother laughed.

"After all," I went on, "it is scarcely for us to cast the first stone at François."

"And why not, may I ask? Is the position of a stockbroker inferior to that of a processor of rabbit skins?"

"No, but . . . guano, I believe, has played some part in the family fortunes."

"Really, that girl will be the death of me!" Aunt Emma moaned.

My mother chimed in: "Ferdinand, have you *no* control over your daughter?"

My family has never relished jokes about guano. That Granny's father, the comte Clapier, should have drawn from the islands of Chincha an immense fortune in less than ten years during the fifties, was perfectly right and proper, but why talk about it?

"Besides," Aunt Emma went on, "you are, as usual, uninformed. We Boussardels have always been landowners. Your grandfather's property included some islands in Peru. What would you call that if not land? It so happened that guano is produced in those islands, as elsewhere, crops or coal. That is all. You are really being excessively stupid!"

"There is no comparison whatever," said my uncle, "with the way in which this unscrupulous young man is proposing to demean himself."

"Just you wait and see," put in my black-swathed aunt. "He'll wake up one fine day to find himself ruined! I have foresight in such matters, and I'm never wrong!"

At this moment a servant came into the room: "Mademoiselle Agnès is wanted on the telephone."

"Who is it wants me?" I asked.

"I beg pardon, mademoiselle, but the operator asked for mademoiselle in person . . . the call is from Le Havre."

I got up and hurried out of the room. The family seemed to have noticed nothing. Their minds were fully occupied with *l'affaire* Gouilloux.

"Allo! is that Mademoiselle Agnès Boussardel?"

"Speaking."

"Hold on, please. I have a Monsieur Kellog on the wire from Le Havre."

I felt that I had to sit down.

"Hello! *Ag'niss?*"

The train, slowing to a halt, passed in front of me, and through the glass of the window I spied Norman. He had caught sight of me, and his lips parted to reveal a flash of teeth. With a shock of pleasure I recognized the gap in the middle of the top row.

He jumped out onto the platform and came tumbling back into my life.

"Ag'niss! I'm so glad to see you! You're looking marvelous!"

He didn't bother to speak French, and I replied in his own language. The bond between us was once more as strong as ever.

I showed Norman the way to the gate, but it was he who seemed to be the guide. He had gripped my arm with one hand, and held me pressed to his side keeping me from being jostled by the crowd. I remembered my own arrival a few months earlier at this same platform, and how the crowd had seemed so hostile. But my brother had been with me then.

"What hotel are you staying at, Norman?"

"Just a moment. A friend gave me the name of a good one."

He flipped through the pages of his address book. I expected him to name some picturesque hotel on the Quais, or

at the top of Montmartre, some place no Parisian had ever heard of.

"Here it is!—the Terminus Saint-Lazare."

I could not keep from laughing. "Why, we're there! It is connected with the station. This way!"

"Fine! I hope you'll have some time for me this evening, *Ag'niss?*"

"Oh, Norman. You know I'd have nothing planned for the evening. In fact, my family thinks I'm in the country staying with a friend."

"Ho, how very French that is!" he said with a smile, adding in a lower voice, "and how nice! . . . You must have dinner with me?"

"Of course I will. I'll come back for you in an hour—is that all right?"

"There's no need to do that. I want to start seeing the sights right away, and I hope you'll come with me."

He asked for a room with "a view of Paris," and told the clerk to have his bags sent up. I looked at him, so lean and handsome in his tweed overcoat, giving his orders so casually, seeming to be not in the least a stranger. A moment later he was at my side again.

"Is this really the first time you've been to Paris, Norman?"

"Yes, and I don't want to waste a moment."

Once again the address book was in his hand. Having found the page, Norman started reeling off, without a pause, "The Louvre, the Place des Vosges, the Arènes de Lutèce, the house in the rue Volta."

"But it's dark, you won't see a thing."

"I'll go back in daylight. I'm in a hurry. I want to compare all those places with the pictures in the books on architecture."

He sat beside me in the taxi. I gave the driver the addresses he had mentioned, admiring his choice. Most Americans would have gone first of all to the Champs Élysées, the Boulevards, or the Pigalle district.

"If you like, Norman, I'll be your guide. I'll show you old corners that scarcely anybody knows, old houses that are probably not on your list. I'll take you to Versailles."

With his face pressed to the window, Norman was discovering Paris.

"How long are you staying?" I asked.

"Only three days. But when I get back from the Tyrol, I'll be here longer. I'm going to the Tyrol to make a study of the local houses. I've got a commission to build a Tyrolean village at Lake Huntington. Big Bear has been a great success, you know."

Only twenty-four hours earlier I could have heard that name without the slightest tremor of emotion. But now the two words woke in me a secret memory. I gripped my companion's hand to keep him from going on.

"Norman, please don't talk to me about Big Bear . . ."

Tears had come into my eyes. I turned away and looked out of the window, making it impossible for him to see how deeply disturbed I was—if, that is, he had been able to take his eyes from the spectacle of the street.

I finished my sentence: ". . . nor about San Francisco, nor about the Pacific beaches."



I woke up next morning in the hotel bed, tired out, heavy-eyed, and with a bad taste in my mouth.

I had flattered myself that with Norman I had never done anything I had not wanted to do; that, ever since childhood, I had always accepted calmly the consequences of my actions without regret. Now, however, a feeling of bitter remorse assailed me. . . . But what had I expected?

It was true that Norman's sudden reappearance had taken me unawares. Though I had not been counting on it, had not, perhaps, even wanted it, I had thought that it might all the same provide me with the answer to the many questions floating in my mind. Like so many people caught between two antagonistic forces, and not really knowing in which direction to go, I had yielded without a fight to the nudge given by destiny: perhaps *this is* the way I wanted to go? . . . I didn't raise a finger to bring it about, still . . . perhaps it's a sign? The coward's way out. Was that how far I had fallen?

Had I genuinely believed that happiness would be born of this renewed meeting? What had been my plan? In what dream had I been living? To win Norman back—to let him win *me* back—to justify, after the event, the earlier fears entertained by my now complacent family about a possible American marriage?

Or was it simply that without intention, without any attempt to control myself, I had succumbed to the turmoil of emotion caused by the reappearance of my American? Had I been waiting for the touch of his lips, for the feel of his strong arms, hoping that the night just past would at least give me back the pleasures I once had known?

Those were all it had given back.

And what, on waking, would he think? That was another point to be considered. What meaning might he not see in the inconsistency of my behavior, in this relapse into our former relationship?

I managed to reach the bathroom without disturbing him. When I returned, fully dressed, Norman, still in pajamas, was busily doing his morning exercises. He broke off to help me into my overcoat, which I had taken down from the hook. Clothed, hatted, gloved, I sat down in an armchair. When I spoke, I tried to do so in a most casual tone.

"I'm afraid I shan't be able to give you all my time, Norman. Besides, I don't suppose I'm the only person you know in Paris, and three days is not a very long time. . . . Perhaps when you get back from the Tyrol you will be less rushed, but unfortunately, I am not sure that I shall still be here. Of course you can always give me a ring if you want to, and if I'm away, you can leave a message. But I don't want you to feel obliged . . ."

I could not go on.

"Why are you saying all this to me, *Ag'niss*?"

"Because . . ." Norman's bluntness, which I had forgotten, merely added to my confusion. "Because what happened last night in this room might have led you to think that I had changed my mind—that I had reconsidered."

I forced myself to smile. Clearly, the result was not very effective. Norman stretched out a hand, but I refused to be stopped.

"No, let me say what I want to say. After all, it is not go-

ing to be very difficult. I have thought a great deal about *us* since I left you. . . . There are so many things between us, Norman!"

"We've had all that out already."

To all my poor attempts he opposed his solid logic.

"Yes, Norman, I know, but I should be miserable if I thought you were angry with me . . . or if you had misunderstood what . . ."

Unable any longer to beat about the bush, I vaguely indicated with a wave of the hand the room in which we were sitting.

"There has been no misunderstanding," Norman said.

I looked at him. He seemed so completely the master of himself! For a moment I forgot his pajamas, the room, the morning sounds which I had never thought that I should hear from this hotel. The man who stood before me was still the young magician of earlier days. He was still capable of solving all my problems with a few words.

With a start I realized he was speaking again. "I am perfectly well aware of what you're trying to explain. As a matter of fact, I am engaged to be married."

The pause which ensued lasted no more than a second. I remembered the American custom in these situations. The possible formulas are few.

"Really?" I said. "Congratulations, Norman."

"Thank you."

"Do I know her?"

"No, I've only known her myself for two months."

I found myself in the street. I could not remember how I

took leave of Norman, how I negotiated the stairs, how I made my way out of the hotel.

Four weeks later, when my friend from America once more "stopped off" in Paris and telephoned to the Avenue Van Dyck, I told them to say that I was out of town. He did not argue with the servant who conveyed this information to him but merely left the name of the hotel where he had previously stayed. I could not bring myself to call him there, still less, to go there in person. I already had a feeling that for a very long time to come I should avoid that end of the rue Saint-Lazare.

Next morning, I sent him a special-delivery letter in which, to avoid any further meeting, I pleaded family duties and unavoidable absence.

I posted these lies with my own hand. They were, I knew, worthy neither of me nor of Norman, least of all of the happy times we had known together. But . . .

When I got back from this errand, I felt tired. Without being really ill, I did not feel altogether well. Since that last meeting of mine with Norman, my health, like my mind, had been all out of sorts.

I reached the house just before lunchtime and found the family collected in the drawing room. Aunt Emma, who was discoursing about something or other, kissed me without interrupting her harangue. The atmosphere was, as always, so stifling that I felt that I had to have some air. I went into the Hall, which was always fresher because of the staircase.

"Is luncheon nearly ready?" I asked, opening the pantry

door. An unpleasant smell of cooking hit me in the face while the servant was replying, making me nauseous. This unusual sensibility to smells showed me how nervous and out-of-sorts I must be.

Nevertheless I was hungry and sat down to the meal with a good appetite. But by the time it was over, I was feeling distinctly queasy and hurried up to my room. The sensation of sickness grew stronger, and I reached my dressing room only just in time.

Seated in an armchair in front of the window which I had opened in spite of the winter cold, my body relaxed and my forehead bathed in sweat, I knew that I must be deadly pale. One thought grew in my mind, expanding like circles on water. . . . My tiredness, my dislike of food, my nauseousness, a certain painful discomfort in my breasts, my general health which, for the last two weeks, had been far from normal. . . . I knew only too well what was wrong with me.

I tried to pull myself together, but one question kept racing through my mind again and again, "What shall I do? What shall I do?" All was confusion. Where was that determined Agnès who had always liked to say, "I can decide this, I have decided that"? Like a lost child she was frightened at the thought that there was no one to whom she could turn. If only she could pour out her troubles to a friendly ear . . . could ask for advice, and follow it. . . .

And suddenly, like light in the darkness an idea came to me. I had just thought of Xavier.

I WENT to a post office in another district from that in which we lived, and put through a telephone call to Cap Baïou. I was not kept waiting for long, but when at last I heard a voice at the other end of the line, it spoke with a strong Midi accent. I was informed that "the gentleman be out fishing for perch," and was told to call again "after sundown"—in other words, in about five hours' time.

I was near one of the big department stores, so I took refuge in its tearoom. All my hopes were concentrated upon Xavier. He was the one person, I told myself, in whom I could find help and support. Xavier would understand me. I shouldn't have to explain to him all the feelings that were churning around in me—agony and hope, bitterness and love, humiliation and defiance, and, deep, deep down in the most secret places of my being, a strange, an unexpected pride at being forced to recognize and acknowledge my condition. Only in Xavier could I possibly confide. My women friends? I knew perfectly well the kind of advice they would give, and that I should refuse to listen to it. Aunt Louise? Since the interests and the honor of the family were at stake, she would be wholly incapable of helping me. But Xavier, the lonely islander, completely detached from conventions and contingencies; Xavier, the only member of the family besides myself who spoke another language; Xavier, who had been preserved from childhood from those Boussardel

poisons of which I had so laboriously purged myself. But Xavier was also of my blood and bore my name.

How strange a reversal! So short a while ago it had been I who had defended him against the schemings of my family, and now, in my turn, I was to seek from him the same defense against the same enemy.

At a quarter to five I went back to the telephone booth. At last. . . .

Xavier's voice was so completely itself that I was on the point of blurting out everything to him then and there. I really believe that had he insisted, I should have done so. But doubtless, with his intuition in such matters, he guessed that my need for protection, even against myself, was urgent.

"If it's important," he said, "and if I am really the only person you can talk to, I'll take the night train and be in Paris tomorrow."

"No, Xavier, I'm not going to be that selfish . . . besides, think of the sensation your unexpected arrival would cause in the Avenue Van Dyck! I don't think that's really a very good idea. I'll find some excuse for leaving town, and come down south."

"We can do better than that, Agnès. Why not meet in Lyon? That way we can each of us cover half the distance. Can you start this evening? Good. I'll drive as far as Toulon, and take the night train from there. Go to Mère Bricot's restaurant . . . any taxi driver in Lyon will know where it is."

The eagerness of his response enchanted me. The dark and dismal day took on a new color. I looked forward, almost

with pleasure, to the journey ahead. How right I had been to put my faith in Xavier!

We were about to hang up; our plans were made. Xavier's voice took on a sudden note of seriousness: "Till tomorrow, then, Agnès. Do you know, I'm very grateful to you for confiding in me. My love to you . . . Good-by."

By the time I reached Lyon, it had begun to rain. To make matters worse, my driver seemed to regard it as a point of honor to avoid the main boulevards. We plunged by round-about ways into the heart of the city which the bad weather had filled, even at noon, with the darkness of night.

The waitresses in the restaurant, still empty at this early hour, insisted on leading me to where the only customer was seated under a full-length and almost life-size photograph of Mère Bricot in the traditional costume of a cook.

Xavier was quietly reading a paper. I got the impression that he had been waiting there for a very long time, for days, perhaps for weeks, ever since those days, perhaps, when we had first got to know one another.

The sound of my heels on the floor did not interrupt his reading, and I found myself standing stock-still by his table. Then he raised his eyes, saw me, smiled, got up from his chair, and kissed me on both cheeks. As yet he had not spoken a word, but now he asked whether the table suited me.

"I could," he said, "have asked for a private room. But at this time of day we shall not be interrupted here for quite a while."

I sat down facing him. I was glad that our meeting and my confession would be surrounded by no air of mystery or secrecy. Above all I did not want to make a display of my emotions. This public room, these unobtrusive waitresses, this portrait of a famous cook who seemed to have her gaze fixed upon us, did not encourage an outpouring of sentiment. Our meeting would be on a purely practical level, which was the only one on which I could hope for a solution of my problem.

While Xavier ordered cocktails, I examined him closely. His complexion had recovered that healthy tint which it had lost during the few weeks he had spent in Paris. The deep tan of the high mountains had given place to a seaside sunburn which was almost golden.

In reply to his questions, I assured him that the journey had not overtired me.

There was a brief silence. Ought I to reveal my secret at once? Obviously not, for Xavier, without giving me time to question him, began to tell me about his island life.

He had lost no time in organizing things. The wife of a neighboring fisherman came in each morning to clean and cook. But she left in the evening, and at night Xavier was alone.

"The house isn't much to look at," he said, "but I've got plans for improving its appearance. I'm thinking of altering the shape of the roof, adding a penthouse, and having the outside walls repainted in Etruscan red, with the shutters in a brighter tint. How does that strike you?" He passed a snapshot to me. It showed an undistinguished, rectangular

building, the only outstanding feature of which was the narrowness and height of the windows.

"It isn't my idea," I said, "of a house for the seaside."

"It's built in a sheltered spot. Most of the houses near it are only fishermen's cottages."

I kept my eyes upon the print, not knowing whether I should ever see the house for myself.

Xavier added with a smile, "Until I came, no human being, within the memory of the locals, had ever lived there."

The shadow of Aunt Emma, the donor of Cap Baïou, passed across the photograph. From blindness or from wisdom, Xavier had never paused to wonder how much of his godmother's generosity was due to vanity, or to absence of concern. He went on describing the place to me, explaining that he had it in mind to make some sort of a terrace, and to install a bathroom in the penthouse.

"Just now," he said, with a chuckle, "bathing is confined to an open-air shower."

"What do you do with yourself all day, Xavier? I know, already, that you go out fishing."

"Not very often. I haven't the time. There's so much to do in the house . . . and in the garden. I mean to plant some vines. If there was a little more moisture on the low ground, I'd grow cuckoopint. I shall try, anyhow."

"In any case," I said, "you are all alone."

I took a mouthful of the traditional *quenelles* which had been put before me. I thought again, not without ill-feeling, of my aunt.

"Xavier," I said, "do you really like being so isolated?"

"I don't know. You see, Agnès, I've grown so used to it."

Our lunch moved to its end. So far I had told him nothing. I had not forgotten the reason why I had asked him so urgently for this meeting, why I had dragged him from his island and made so long a journey. I had, however, put off the moment of confession.

Perhaps it was because I was no longer feeling so uneasy. I knew already that everything would come out all right. How did I know? I cannot say. But I knew!

Still, I could not go on like this. I must say something. I almost regretted that I had not, while eating, experienced any of that queasiness of which I had been conscious twenty-four hours earlier. The slightest sign of pallor might have put my companion wise; in any case, I should have had to explain it.

I gulped down my coffee, and said how good it was. I asked Xavier for a cigarette, and leaned across the table to reach the lighter he was holding out. I stayed in that position, leaning on my elbow. I blew out a cloud of smoke, and at last. . . .

"There's something I want to tell you," I said.

He said nothing, but a sudden change in his eyes which I should find it difficult to describe told me that Xavier was giving me the whole of his attention.

"I am trying not to take all this too tragically, but what has happened is, all the same, worrying. . . . To cut a long story short, I'm . . ."

"Oh!" he said.

It had not been necessary for me to say more; he had already understood. Interrupting me with a spread of his fingers, he spared me the necessity of explaining myself. He

was deep in thought, as we both fell silent. I was not yet sure what his reaction would be, but I was prepared to swear what it would *not* be. I indulged in the wicked pleasure of imagining my mother, my aunt, or even Simon in his place—their immediate outcry, their fury. Xavier, gazing silently in front of him, seemed already to be witnessing the arrival of this new Boussardel who was on the point of entering the family through an illegitimate door. But certainly he did not see him as a messenger of either dishonor or ruin.

He did not ask a single question. When at last he broke the silence, he seemed to be speaking his thoughts aloud. "And since you don't seem to know what to do," he murmured—"It is obvious that you can't marry the man."

I opened my lips, but, as before, he stopped me with a movement of his hand.

"*Why* doesn't matter. That's your concern, and no one else's—in any case, it would not alter the situation."

I am afraid I could not help but wonder at the way he was making everything easy for me by reducing the part I had to play and taking every obstacle at a gallop. Xavier, indeed, seemed to be talking to himself rather than to the young woman facing him.

"Certainly," he said, "there's nothing to be gained by telling the truth to the family."

I had to keep myself from expressing my surprise. Did he too, as I did, presume to sit in judgment on our elders? . . . I discovered yet another bond between us.

But his expression had changed. A cloud seemed to have passed from his face. His gaze came down to earth again,

was once more fixed on me. I realized then that he had found the solution, and that it was of a nature to attract, even to amuse him.

Spreading his hands, and with a delighted look, he said, "Marry me!"

About the middle of the afternoon the rain stopped. We were together in the little drawing room of the silent hotel where I was to spend the night before going back to Paris. Within the shelter of its walls we had been examining every aspect of the situation in which we had agreed to become involved. Doubtless because he was not the only person concerned, and because helping others acted upon him as a stimulant, Xavier showed more resolution than I did. He had taken the reins in hand with an authority and practicality which was not the least surprising of this surprising day's revelations. He had hurried matters on at breakneck speed, had decided how best to deal with the family, and had sent off a telegram to the Avenue Van Dyck. Not only did it announce our impending return, but spoke of a "great decision reached by the two of us" which, we hoped, "would meet with full approval of our relatives."

We should, therefore, make our appearance on ground already prepared. The telegram could be interpreted in many different ways. Aunt Emma would almost certainly be delighted at the thought of a marriage between the two "misfits" of the family.

When a gleam of sunlight filtering through the windows of our little drawing room gave proof that the rain had

stopped, we left the hotel. Our footsteps led us in the direction of the river, and finally brought us to the bridge. We stopped, and I leaned on the parapet. The thick yellow waters of the Rhône flowed beneath us.

Immediately below us, on the flat stretch of earth which runs along the bank, the sites reserved for the boules-players were deserted. The now clear sky was reflected in the puddles. All around us on the bridge the city crowds were hurrying by, and we could hear the horns of the buses.

Xavier was leaning at my side. I found, after a few moments, that my body had, almost instinctively, leaned sideways and was now touching his shoulder. For the first time I was conscious of my cousin as a being of flesh and blood. It was a thought that had in it not the least semblance of desire. This sense of contact with the man who was to be my husband was entirely chaste.

Once again, and with a feeling of great happiness, I wondered at the way in which, while we had talked of our plans, he had avoided asking a single one of those questions which anybody else in the same position would at once have put to me.

Without moving from our parapet, without giving him so much as a sidelong glance, I said, "You really are a most extraordinary person, Xavier. You haven't even asked me whether you run the risk of one day having to be ashamed for this child."

His reply was, "That is because you, most certainly, won't."

I was left to understand that in whatever way I liked.

We were still gazing into space. Shoulder to shoulder,

suspended between the voice of the river and the voice of the city, we talked together in the voices that were our own.

"Nor, Xavier, have you asked whether this foreign young man, whose name you do not even know, was worthy of me."

"He must have been, since you chose him."

"How highly you rate my judgment and my character. Are you sure, Xavier, that the truth may not lie below the level at which your thoughts are moving?"

"How could it, since I am making you my wife?"

5.

THE announcement of our impending marriage was greeted with general approval. It settled everything. The Avenue Van Dyck took on a festive air. Never had I been so smiled upon. Aunt Emma did not, it is true, hand over the two million which were to have accompanied the Mortier match. That plan having gone awry, she probably supposed that I had never known of the existence, or at least the amount, of the promised settlement. All the same, she let herself be carried away to the extent of raising her original figure to a million and a half, in addition to the gift of Cap Baïou.

But it was on my account that the family most rejoiced. For me this marriage was an unhopèd-for blessing. I had been the cause of so much anxiety! For years it had been the popular conviction that I should end by marrying outside the family. Ten to one, Agnès would get herself tied up

to a spendthrift! A social nobody! Had there not already been consternation in the family at the thought that she might return from the banks of the Missouri with a jazz-player or an ex-gangster on her arm? Anything might be expected of her.

Yes, anything might be expected, even the least probable of all the possibilities. And now, here she was, just like anybody else, proposing to marry within the family! She was going to settle down with a Boussardel. Even the name would continue to be her own. Well, perhaps she had been judged a little bit unfairly. In any case, the time had come to wipe away the past.

I had never been well liked in the Plaine Monceau, but now nothing was too good for me. I was embraced even more warmly than Xavier, who had caused far less anxiety. Granny presented me with her diamond ear-clips, two five-carat stones of the finest quality. This present, so out of line with what had normally been expected of the old lady's testamentary arrangements, aroused no hostility, brought no grudging remarks at my expense—not even from Simon—and this alone was proof how far the universal feeling of contentment went.

Only my mother, in the very act of congratulating me on my "wise decision," kept her watchful eyes ready. I could feel the presence in her mind of many unspoken thoughts. I believe that she would, instinctively, have preferred a glaring scandal which would have given her an excuse for breaking off all relations with me. And I was sure she was still harboring some vague suspicion. Still, I knew her too

well not to realize that she would keep it to herself, since it was so much to her advantage to see so admirable an arrangement brought to a safe conclusion.

When, on the very morning of our arrival, Xavier said that we wanted to get married as soon as possible, and asked that our engagement period should be reduced to the bare minimum required by decency, there was some surprise, a good deal of sly smiling, but practically no opposition.

"How impatient the dear young things are!" Aunt Emma exclaimed.

There was a gleam in her eye. To her joy as aunt and godmother was added that peculiar excitement into which old maids are invariably thrown by the prospect of a wedding.

Uncle Théodore, whose shooting stories were sometimes a preliminary to anecdotes of a broader nature, made no bones about saying audibly, "Oho—a question of necessity perhaps!"

Touched very closely by this observation, and more painfully than my uncle could possibly have known, I turned away. I was especially afraid of catching Xavier's eye. I heard him utter a few words of good-humored reproach:

"That kind of talk is best left until no ladies are present, Uncle!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" guffawed the other. "You'll notice the young scamp doesn't deny it. Emma, this godson of yours is a positive Casanova."

"Théodore," said my aunt, busily radiating sweetness and light, "you shouldn't tease them . . . They're going to get

married, and naturally they are shy. Look what you've done! Xavier is as red as a peony, and Agnès doesn't know where to hide her blushes!"

What embarrassed me was not my uncle's sly dig—whether delivered innocently or not—or the living echo which it produced in me; nor was it my aunt's indulgent comment about us "going to get married." No, it was Xavier's display of diplomacy which had impressed itself upon me more by reason of the devotion it showed than by the skill with which it was delivered.

Immediately after the nuptial benediction had been pronounced, and while the reception rooms at the Avenue Van Dyck were still full of guests, Aunt Emma slipped away with the air of a schoolboy playing truant and left with us for the Gare de Lyon. Xavier was taking me to Cap Baïou.

We had announced we were postponing our honeymoon until later. We had intended to go to Hanoï, where Xavier's mother and stepfather were living.

"But why not at once?" asked Aunt Emma. "It won't be the same thing if you wait."

This time, again, Xavier spared me the necessity of replying.

"It was I who asked Agnès to wait until the autumn. I have a lot of work to do at Cap Baïou, and I want to be there to keep an eye on it."

Aunt Emma, who was nothing if not tolerant, said that of course we must please ourselves.

"If you prefer solitude for your honeymoon, that is your

affair . . . Come now, wasn't your old godmother inspired when she decided to keep Cap Baïou in her own hands? But I never dreamed that my island would one day shelter a romantic idyll."

With eyes gazing vaguely out of the car which was taking us to the station, our spinster relation seemed to be lost in a dream.

She was crying and, I believe, quite sincerely, when she kissed us good-by on the platform. She had been full of admiration of our separate sleeping compartments, the more so since she knew nothing of such luxury.

"I can travel only by day," she said more than once. "If I *did* take a night train I should never *dare* to undress. Why, just suppose there was an accident and I had to climb out in my underclothing! Heavens!"

We had lowered the window of the corridor, and as I leaned out, I listened to her with more than my usual patience. Xavier went off to get my fur coat and put it around my shoulders, over my suit.

"You mustn't catch cold," he said.

He watched over me, surrounded me with care and solicitude, as though I had been sick—which, indeed, I had.

At last the train began to move. My aunt slipped away into the distance, a small figure waving a white handkerchief above the black mountain of her mourning. The train increased its speed and carried us away from Paris.

I found it difficult to sleep. Nor could I keep my attention on the book I had brought with me. Lying there, the light of the reading lamp behind my head, I questioned my-

self for a long while and tried to see into the future—a future which I should spend in the company of the man shut away in the next compartment.

And then, when I awoke, I found myself in a miraculous new world of blue-enamel bays, little towns built above the encroaching sea, a different season. . . .

But at Hyères, where we lunched, the weather changed. The mistral had whipped the Mediterranean into white sea horses, the very color of the sea was different. Xavier suggested that we put off our crossing, which took more than an hour, until the next day, but I refused.

I bore the ordeal well. Though the sea was turbulent, I was a good sailor, and I had been careful to take two anti-seasick tablets.

I had happened on them the evening before while I was packing. They had been in one of the pockets of my suitcase ever since my return from the United States.

Cap Baïou did not repel me. A more theatrical setting, a house with greater individual character would, I think, have made me mistrustful. The sight of this house which concealed no apparent mystery, built on one of the more level parts of the island, gave me no feeling of hesitation.

A few days later, I became Xavier's wife in fact. It happened quite naturally, and almost, I might say, without my knowing that it had happened at all. We had just come in from a gusty walk along the northern cliffs.

We were still a bit dazed when we reached the house. Our eyes were heavy, our ears hot. The servant brought us a large bowl of *minestrone* which she had made herself, and

very good it was. The meal, washed down with a glass of Corsican wine, made us sleepier still, so that we yawned our way to the large divan in the studio.

After an interval—how long it was I do not know—I was awakened by the sensation of something warm pressing close to my right side. Xavier was still sleeping, but he moved in his sleep, coming close to me, speaking my name. I opened my arms. Had I the right, at this moment, to refuse him what he so much wanted but had not asked for when he was awake?

This scruple of mine, and the event with which it was connected, may seem surprising, and Xavier's behavior that day on our island in flat contradiction with what he had said to me at Lyon. I know how romantic a "marriage in name only" might have seemed to others in the circumstances. But I have promised, haven't I, to tell the whole truth, to falsify neither myself nor anybody else? Xavier was no saint, but a man of flesh and blood. By revealing himself as such on that late autumn afternoon at Cap Baïou, far from disappointing me, he made himself more dear to me. I realized then that he and I were made of the same clay.

My health was excellent. Our married life took its natural course. It seemed to me that Xavier was happy, and I rejoiced that he should be. In my own way I shared his happiness, though not his pleasure. On that first evening I had realized that it was to be refused me. This failure, which did not wholly surprise me, which, I am inclined to think, is a commonplace occurrence in the lives of many women, made me neither rebellious nor bitter. I might, had I brought cold reason to bear, have accepted it as some sort

of well-deserved penalty. As it was, I acquiesced as in a perfectly normal experience. Perhaps I ought not to say this, but it seemed to me no more than natural that I should not have with Xavier the same sort of emotional response which another had once produced in me.

It was sufficient happiness for me to look at my husband's spare but supple figure, at his well cut face, at, above all, those surprising eyes of his, and to tell myself that he was neither feeble nor clumsy, that he might well inspire passion in another woman. He had as much physical virility as other men—only, that virility did not stir me.

Why? And why, too, should the whole situation have seemed to me so simple? Why had I expected something of the sort? Why, perhaps, had I been unconsciously prepared for it?

One night as I lay motionless in our room beside the sleeping Xavier, unable myself to sleep and once again chewing over the whole question, a strange light flared suddenly in my mind, or rather, in my memory.

This light from the past seemed to illuminate for me the figures of my mother and Aunt Julianne, walking along one of the paths that threaded our property in Sologne. I remember that they were wearing those short dresses, puffed at the waist, a fashion which was just then at its hideous height. They were chatting as they walked, and imagined they were alone. I was lying hidden in the bushes which bordered the path in a kind of cell, made of greenery, which was completely invisible from the outside.

Many were the hours I had spent there. I had furnished it with odds and ends, discarded objects, a scrap of carpet,

a bench with one leg missing, a number of chipped saucers, an old footwarmer. With three raw carrots, a glass of water from the pump, and a crust of bread, I used to have solitary picnics. Sometimes the shouts of my brothers, annoyed at not being able to play on me the teasing tricks which they had so carefully prepared, echoed through the park and gave a sharper edge to my pleasure.

But the voice which had reached me through my leafy curtain, the voice which after so many years was audible to the ears of memory, belonged to my mother.

"I know exactly what you mean, Julianne dear, without your going into details. But what can you expect? Speaking for myself, I get no pleasure at all, I would almost say, no feeling of any kind, but that does not prevent me from having children."

It was this last remark that made me prick up my ears. Aunt Julianne, in a tone of practical good-sense, replied that there was no connection whatever between "the two things." My mother went on:

"You may not believe it, but I used to get a much bigger thrill from just dancing with the lieutenant . . . though there was never any question, never could have been, of my marrying him."

They started off again, drew away from me, turned and came back. As my mother passed me I could again hear what she was saying: "It seems perfectly simple to me—a woman does not love her husband in *that* way."

The scene, the phrase, the idea had now, at last, emerged into the light of day. But until that moment, until it had found release in that Cap Baïou bedroom, it had been alive

and working deep down in me. It had formed part of that hard kernel of error which lies hidden within the nature of every child, which comes slowly to maturity, the fragments of which cause frustration when he or she reaches the age of reason. Who can say whence these cystlike fruits draw their sustenance? Why they take so long to ripen? . . .

Misunderstandings, mistrust, aberrations, sometimes harmful and all secretly brooded over. . . . For those who live with them they quickly form a world apart, a world in which eddying mists take on form and substance, in which ghostly figures have a life of their own, in which women can never know the pleasures of the senses except outside the bonds of marriage, can enjoy the physical aspects of love only with men who are not their husbands.

But however clearly I might now see the origin of this false idea, knowledge did not exorcise it. It was still profoundly at work in my body. Xavier's kisses brought no warmth to me. But, like so many of my fellow women—for I knew now that I was inevitably one of a special type—I nevertheless *pretended* pleasure, so well that, as far as I could see, my young husband never felt the slightest uneasiness on that score.

Above all, I made a great effort not to let him see that my affection for him was no more than maternal. All day long I kept a careful watch upon how I spoke and what I did. I never let myself relax except at night, when Xavier was asleep.

It was then, in the unconsciousness of slumber, that he became for me what he really was. As he lay there, relaxed

in sleep, I saw him as a little boy. Feeling the thin body pressed to my side, and the great head heavy on my shoulder, I knew that an aging child had been given me to cradle, one of the tired offspring of my own race.

6. *The Fall*

I.

IT ONLY remained for us now to inform the family that I was expecting a child.

We had decided not to be too hasty. No more than a fortnight had passed since the wedding. Barely a month had elapsed between my night at the Hotel Terminus and my journey to Lyon. After our meeting in that city, Xavier and I had so successfully managed to hurry matters through that within three weeks we had become man and wife. We

could safely announce for the end of November an event which would, in fact, have occurred some time in the first weeks of October. Xavier's presence of mind, and doubtless, too, my uncle's scabrous assumption, had made it certain that the family would not be taken by surprise or feel inclined to be suspicious.

Time passed in an atmosphere of peace. The stocks had been for some time filling the air about our Cap Baïou home with their vinegary smell when one morning Xavier telephoned a message to be wired to the Avenue Van Dyck. Only a little more than two miles lay between us and the nearest post office. The postmistress was in the habit of reading to us over the telephone such telegrams as we received.

That same day, shortly before dinner, the telephone rang. I had already begun to feel listless, and Xavier frequently spared me the trouble of having to move. It was he who took the call.

"Yes, mademoiselle," I heard him say, "I shall be much obliged if you will read it to me."

"Is that the answer to our telegram?" I asked from where I was sitting.

Xavier nodded. He was listening attentively and, so it seemed to me, with an expression of increasing surprise. When he came back to me he said nothing.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"My godmother has asked me to go to Paris—immediately."

"What!"

"I'm not joking—this is what she says." And he repeated the text of the telegram from memory. "Message received—

come at once—talk necessary—love—Godmother.” . . . I’ve no idea what it can all be about.”

“Money, I expect, Xavier, or something like that. What else could it be?”

“That’s what I wonder. Why doesn’t she say anything about our news?”

He seemed uneasy, and this alarmed me; it was as though he had some intuition which I did not possess.

“Xavier, what are you going to do about it?”

“Telephone her.”

He got through at once. But the line was too bad for me to make out anything that came through the earphone. I had to follow the conversation as best I could through the medium of Xavier’s replies.

“I got your telegram: what does it mean? . . . Can’t you give me some idea? . . . Is it really so urgent? . . . All right then, if you insist, I’ll come. But it is too late for me to catch the night mail. . . . Tomorrow morning? Make the journey by day? But that will take two hours longer.”

He seemed to be controlling himself with difficulty, briefly promised to do as she wished, and hung up.

“I’m no nearer understanding what it’s all about,” he said to me. “She swears that it’s serious and urgent, and positively refuses to say a word until I get to Paris. She says that what she has to tell me can be told only when she sees me, and not over the telephone. Then, as always, reading my thoughts, “No, it can’t be anything to do with us . . . anything connected with what we’ve told her . . . how could it be?”

He walked up and down the room, deep in thought. His

steps echoed on the tiled floor over which only a thin mat was laid. His face had a look of great determination.

"No one knows? You haven't confided in anybody else?"

"Of course I haven't, Xavier. I would have told you if I had. Not even in a doctor. Why, even the . . . young man concerned doesn't know a thing. But, you see . . . you're thinking along the same lines as I am."

He sat on the arm of my chair and put an arm around my shoulder. He said nothing.

I was hoping to get a telegram from him not later than the following evening. He would certainly inform me, as soon as he knew it, of the reason for his summons to Paris. But nothing came. It was not until the following morning, about eleven, that the telephone rang. It was the postmistress.

"Is that Madame Boussardel?" she asked. "I have a telegram for you, shall I read it?"

"Yes, please."

"I'm afraid . . . it's . . . not very good news: better to warn you, isn't it?"

"Bad news? About my husband?"

"Yes, an accident."

"Read it!"

"This is what it says." She read the message, cutting it up into lengths in the oddest way: "Have to inform you accident . . . occurred Xavier fallen out of window no use ringing us . . . have had telephone disconnected. Signed, Boussardel."

Needless to say I called them at once. Never had our Cap

Baïou line been so continuously in use as during the next twenty-four hours.

"Why did they say they'd been disconnected?" I thought, with the receiver to my ear. "I can hear it ringing quite clearly."

Somebody far away, somebody in Paris, in the Avenue Van Dyck, took the receiver off.

"Absent Subscribers' Information speaking."

"What?"

"Are you calling Madame Victorin Boussardel?"

"Madame Victorin . . ." Then I remembered that, as a sign of respect, our number in the Directory appeared under Granny's name.

"Yes, please, will you put me through?"

"I am afraid that is impossible. I have been given strict instructions. No calls are to be put through—because of illness."

"I know, I gather there has been a fall. . . . Am I right?"

"All I know, madame, is that there is illness in the house."

"Well, at least, can you tell me how he is?"

"We have no information."

2.

THERE was nobody in the courtyard of the house in the Avenue Van Dyck, and in the Hall, only a single footman. I had telegraphed the time of my arrival from Marseille, with the result that, at the hour named, every member of the family who lived in the house had scurried

for cover. Even old Emile and Francisa had been given definite instructions about not being seen. I could no longer have the slightest doubt: this business had something to do with me. I was involved; the announcement of the coming of the child was involved. Everything to do with this accident was beyond my power to understand.

The footman was the only person I could speak to.

"Where is my husband?"

"In the first room of the reception suite."

"On the ground floor? Why not in his old room—or mine?"

"Monsieur Xavier was taken into the small drawing room immediately after the fall, and since the doctor said it would be better not to move him, he has been left there. A bed has been brought down."

My hand was on the latch of the door leading into the gallery. I turned and faced the servant.

"How is he? Is it serious?"

"Monsieur Xavier is getting on as well as can be expected."

They had all been told to say that. I opened the door and walked into the picture gallery. This was the second time this house had given me an unfriendly welcome. But I knew already that what was awaiting me today was something far worse than a disapproving silence, or a scene. It was nothing less than tragedy.

I laid my hand on the door of the smaller of the two drawing rooms. Very quietly, I pushed. . . .

Against the whiteness of the sheets Xavier's face looked yellow, almost gray. There was a compress on his forehead.

He appeared to be sleeping. A nurse had risen to her feet when I came in, and now approached me. Before making me turn back through the doorway, she let me take another look at the figure on the bed.

At ordinary times light flooded in through the four windows and filled this room with brightness. But all the shutters had been closed except one which allowed a narrow beam of daylight to enter. The iron camp bed, almost a servant's bed, stood with its back to the Aubusson tapestry. The whole appearance of the place was different. . . . Suddenly, I felt a lump in my throat. I had just recalled how it had looked on the night of the party. It was here, under the glitter of the chandeliers and in front of the assembled family, that I had fixed Xavier's evening tie . . . and now, here was Xavier lying helpless and unconscious. His face, so recently burned to a lovely brown at our Cap Baïou, still showed traces of tan, but with it now was mixed a mysterious ashen tint—the gift already, perhaps, of a different sun in a different sky.

I turned to the nurse. My lips through which no words would come, framed a silent question.

"He is resting," she said in a low voice. "He has been in serious condition ever since he had his fall." She pushed me backwards through the doorway, and followed me into the long gallery which was filled with a harsher daylight. Cautiously, and without uttering a word, we went toward the Hall. There, in the silence of the house, we stood whispering. I knew that there were many persons hidden away in its rooms, anxious persons, persons overwhelmed by what had happened to Xavier, and by other considerations of

which I knew nothing. But not till I had left would they open their doors and come downstairs. . . . I was powerless to keep these ideas out of my mind; but underneath I was thinking only of Xavier.

"Mademoiselle, I know nothing. Do, please, tell me what happened. Don't hide the truth from me! You know who I am?"

"Yes, madame, I was informed of your arrival. . . . There is no fracture of the skull, as was at first feared. . . ."

"Then what . . ."

"What we still fear is that there may be pressure on the brain as the result of internal hemorrhage."

"And in that case . . ."

"In that case, madame, the situation would be very, very serious—anything might happen."

"Oh God!"

I could say nothing, think nothing. After a moment's silence, however, I was able to ask, "How did he come to fall?"

"He was in a room on the third floor . . ."

"The third?"

"Yes, and he fell into the garden. Luckily his fall was broken by some shrubberies."

"Shrubberies under the window? But . . . was my husband in *my* room, then?"

"I don't know the details. It was only much later that I was sent for."

There was a silence. I thought of those of my relatives who must know something. Useless to make any attempt

to see my mother or Aunt Emma. They would avoid me; would leave word that they had gone out.

"Mademoiselle," I said to the nurse, "can I be of any assistance to you?"

"No, madame. There is not much that can be done for the patient at the moment. He has to be watched, that is all, and in that duty I need no help."

"All right, then, I'm going out. I shall be back in half an hour."

I found myself running down the Avenue Van Dyck. I hailed a taxi.

"Rue Rennequin, corner of the Avenue de Wagram . . . and hurry!"

"I was expecting you would come!"

Aunt Louise had come to the door herself. Her face looked drawn. She shut the drawing-room door behind us and stood with her hands clasped. But she did not give me the impulsive welcome I had been expecting.

"Aunt Louise, you are the only person on whom I can rely to tell me what has happened!"

"But, Agnès, you have seen Xavier, you know what condition he is in."

"Yes, the nurse has told me what it is they fear."

"The poor boy might have been killed but for that shrubbery."

"I know. What I don't know is how and why he came to fall out of my window. . . ."

"Agnès, I was not at the Avenue Van Dyck when it happened."

"Still, you must know."

"Why don't you ask your mother, or Emma? They are in a better position than I am—"

I cut her short. "They are both invisible—to me, at least. The whole family is invisible! They all have vanished like rabbits into their warren."

"It is very unjust of you to say that! Since the accident occurred your mother has not left your grandmother for a single moment—she has taken a turn for the worse. Emma, it may not surprise you to know, has had a crisis. . . ."

"Surprised is the last thing I am! Aunt Louise, I know that you never like taking sides in family squabbles. I'm not asking you to take sides, only to do a little explaining. You must realize that only a half-wit would fail to see that there is some mystery behind this accident, some mystery which concerns Xavier, which concerns both of us. It is obvious that I am being deliberately kept in the dark! If only you knew what I've been going through for the last twenty-four hours, the conjectures I have been making! Have you any idea what I felt when I saw Xavier lying there motionless on that bed? I thought he had died!"

It was this outburst of mine that touched her. She could stand out against my arguments, but when she heard the break in my voice, something happened to her. She took my hands.

"My poor child! I know how miserable you are—no matter what you may have done."

"What I may have done? I implore you, Aunt Louise, to tell me what has been going on!"

"Well, then . . . I will. Emma made Xavier come from

Cap Baïou alone in order to tell him that you have abused his trust."

"What!"

"Yes—in other words, Emma told him she was quite certain that the child you are expecting is not his."

"But . . ."

"I am only telling you what she said."

"You are right; go on."

"According to Emma, you would never have married Xavier if you hadn't wanted to saddle him with it."

"But didn't Xavier protest?"

"Indeed he did. He immediately went to your defense. He gave her details and dates . . . I had all this from Théodore who was present at the interview as head of the family. It was impossible to expose our mother to such an ordeal."

"Did Xavier convince them?"

"No. Emma, it appears, had one piece of damning evidence in reserve. What it is I don't know: Théodore did not tell me. I am not even certain that he knows it himself. . . . Your aunt begged Xavier to take her word for it. 'You *can't* be the father, I give you my word that you can't. That ought to be enough for you.' But it wasn't."

"I should think not!"

"To cut a long story short, she finally sent Théodore out of the room and closeted herself alone with Xavier. Five minutes later he came out with a dead-white face. Without a word he went up to your room on the third floor. No one stopped him; they thought he wanted to be alone to pull himself together. It was after ten o'clock at night. A half hour later Emma said, "I think I had better go up and see

how he is." She went up. They heard her utter a piercing shriek, and she rushed into the Hall shouting that Xavier had thrown himself out of the window! They ran into the garden and found the poor fellow lying unconscious. . . . Now you know everything."

She was in tears, and perspiring. She took out her handkerchief and mopped her face. "But . . . but . . . Aunt Louise, do you mean to tell me that Xavier threw himself out of the window on purpose?"

"Yes, my poor child. Unfortunately, there can be no doubt about it."

"But that's impossible! Aunt Emma told Xavier nothing he did not know already! Xavier was perfectly well aware that the child is not his!"

"What are you saying!"

"It was he who suggested that we should get married, and he did so in order to get me out of a mess which I had brought upon myself. Very shortly after . . . after a moment of wild imprudence with a man I couldn't marry . . . it would take too long to tell you all about that, and anyhow it hasn't anything to do with the present situation . . . I realized that the worst had happened. I was at my wit's end. I went to Lyon to tell Xavier everything, and to ask his advice. He said 'marry me.' Now do you understand?"

Something very much like relief showed on Aunt Louise's worn face.

"So you see, there was no reason whatever for Xavier to have committed an act of despair. He certainly had no intention of doing any such thing. What, then, can have happened?"

We sat there silent, both of us. Somewhat out of breath, I set myself to think. But the only answer I could find took the form of another question.

"What can Aunt Emma have said to him?"

"I know no more than you," Aunt Louise murmured. "How extraordinary it all is!"

I got up from my chair. "I shall go and ask her myself—that is the simplest way out of the difficulty."

"Ask Emma? Oh, my dear, do be careful! She will say the most awful things to you . . . she has already used certain words . . ."

"Strumpet, I suppose? And whore?"

"No . . . adventuress was what she called you. She said that you had tried 'to trick' her godson."

"That's where the shoe pinches, is it? Poor Aunt Emma!"

I went out into the passage. "Thank you, Aunt Louise, for being so sweet to me . . . and do please wait before condemning me. . . . Don't be too severe on me in your heart."

"Oh," she said, "be sure that in my heart I shall not."

"When may I see you again?"

"This evening. I'm going around to the Avenue Van Dyck to hear what the doctors have said."

"The doctors?"

"Yes. Mesureur has asked to be allowed to call in a specialist."

"So much the better! Good heavens, if Xavier had no one but Mesureur to rely on!"

I conjured up a picture of our family doctor's bearded face: a man without initiative, a past master of the bedside

manner, a believer in out-of-date methods, but with endless letters after his name—just the sort of doctor suited to the Boussardels, a high-ranking practitioner worthy of high-ranking men of business! I dismissed any idea of going to him for enlightenment, though he must surely be in on the secret.

I told my taxi driver to stop in front of the gate which led into the courtyard of our house. I did not get out, but pushed aside the pane of glass which separated me from the driver.

"I wonder whether you would do me a great service? Go into this courtyard, follow the little path which you will see between the house and the railings, and knock very gently at the French door. A nurse will come out. Show her this card of mine."

I watched him through the bushes. I did not leave the taxi until the nurse appeared. A meeting with my mother or Aunt Emma, which I had wanted only a short while before, would interfere with my present plans.

I motioned to the nurse to come to the railings. I spoke to her. We were separated by the wall, by the bars, of this house which now seemed more than ever impregnable.

"I am afraid I am disturbing you, mademoiselle . . . but I very much want to know the name of the specialist whom Dr. Mesureur has asked to come and see my husband."

"Dr. Roger Oswald, madame."

"Where can I find him at this time of day—at his home?"

"No, madame, Dr. Oswald is at the Lariboisière hospital until noon."

3.

I WAS asked to wait. If I would stay in the corridor, I could not help seeing Dr. Oswald. When his morning's work in the wards was over, he would be bound to walk down it in order to reach the office which served as his consulting room.

"Have you an appointment?" asked the nurse on duty, with a glance at my furs and my general appearance.

"No, but I can wait as long as necessary."

I gave her my card, which she read and then slipped into the pocket of her uniform.

Time passed. I did not like to stare at the people around me. Twice the door of one of the wards opened to give way to a luncheon trolley piled with dirty plates and empty containers. I had just time to catch a glimpse of two rows of beds.

At the far end of the corridor a group appeared, issuing from another ward. They were young, and dressed in white. Nearly all of them were men, but there were three or four girls as well. The patients near me stood up, and I followed suit. Looking at the newcomers, I thought, "These must be Dr. Oswald's pupils. He cannot be far off."

The sister in charge of the ward went up to the group and handed my card to one of the young men, no doubt the principal assistant. Having read my name, he detached himself from the rest and came toward me, holding the card between his fingers.

"I am Dr. Oswald."

So completely surprised was I that for a moment I could not make the explanation which I had prepared. I saw before me a wiry young man, buttoned up to the neck in white. Only his penetrating eyes and the gray hair at his temples gave evidence of a mature man worn by study and responsibility.

"I hope you will realize, doctor, that I am fully aware of my indiscretion in—"

He interrupted me. "I understand perfectly. I am not at all surprised to see you."

I, too, understood. Mesureur and his beard seemed very far away. The incisive voice, the directness with which he spoke . . . I knew that this man would listen to me. The concentrated way in which he looked at me was something far beyond professional good manners. Besides, we were very near the same age. . . . I had done well to seek him out.

He walked before me to the glazed door of his consulting room and opened it.

"Doctor," I said, "several of these people were here before me."

"I know," he replied, "but you ought to get back as soon as possible to your husband."

He directed me into the room, and I was conscious of his strong supporting hand in the small of my back. I abandoned all attempt to resist. The students had not followed us, showing they realized this was an interview, not a consultation. My heart was beating violently, but it calmed down as soon as I found myself seated opposite the doctor.

"I can tell you nothing definite until this evening. When we had our consultation this morning, there had been, so far, no sign of complications."

"I know that, doctor. The nurse in charge told me that much. But the information I want from you—I will come straight to the point, and I do not wish to question Dr. Mesureur, for personal reasons—I must apologize for being rather upset . . ."

I was too hot and loosened my furs. Dr. Oswald got up and opened the window wider. The fresh air did me good.

"What you want from me," he said, as he resumed his seat, "is, I suppose, an explanation."

"Yes . . . there can be no point in my going into further details . . ."

With a wave of the hand he cut me short. "An explanation of what, madame?"

"Of the accident, doctor, and of the circumstances which precipitated it."

"I am afraid I must disappoint you. I have told you what I know of the patient's condition. As to the causes, you must realize . . ."

Now that I had, to some extent, recovered my self-control, I could no longer keep to myself what I longed to say. I wanted to have done with procrastination and to put Dr. Oswald at his ease.

I burst out, "But, you see, it is I who am supposed to have been the cause of what happened! I know my family's version—namely that my husband had learned that the baby I am expecting could not possibly be his, and, under the stress of that shock, behaved as he did . . ."

"How did he behave?"

"So, you don't believe it any more than I do?"

He said nothing, and I went on:

"Don't think I don't understand, doctor. I am not so simple as to think that I can make you say what you have made up your mind not to say. All the same, I *am* his wife, and if I had been there . . . still, that is beside the point. I have the right to know, if not the cause, at least the nature, of the accident? How did he come to fall? Can you not give me an answer to that question?"

He looked away. I waited patiently. At last, weighing his words, he said, "You must know as well as I do that we are dealing with a hypersensitive subject. In the room to which he had gone for peace and quiet, he was overcome by a feeling of sickness. He opened the window, he leaned on the sill, he vomited. He leaned farther out, he vomited again. He struggled against the attack and became dizzy. He lost his balance. That's all."

The picture which his words conjured up left me speechless. I was sure something more had been involved than a natural queasiness. . . . Xavier alone at the window, so haunted, so nauseated by disgust that he was sick, and collapsed as a result. I scarcely heard the doctor as he explained how it had been possible to reconstruct the scene—traces of vomit on the second-floor cornice, and also on the bushes into which the body fell. . . .

"But what can he have been told to have brought on such an attack?"

An evasive gesture on the part of Dr. Oswald recalled his

presence to me. It was not to him that I had addressed my question. I knew perfectly well that he would tell me no more. This man knew everything, and I did not. There was nothing I could do. I had felt his sympathy; I felt it still. But I felt, too, the weight of his refusal.

I was no clearer in my mind than I had been. Between what he had said and what Aunt Louise had said, there was a blank. There was no means by which I could fill it.

I stood up, as only an hour before I had done in the rue Rennequin. It was time for me to go. I could see myself already opening Aunt Emma's door, forcing it open. Why had I not started with her?

I thanked the doctor for being so patient with me, and apologized for having taken up so much of his time. I reached the door, and opened it. On a chair in the corridor was Aunt Louise.

"How did you know I was here? I suppose mademoiselle told you? It was sweet of you to come, Aunt Louise, but I'm afraid I can't wait; I'm in a hurry."

"Where are you going, Agnès?"

"To the Avenue Van Dyck."

We set off down the long corridor, Aunt Louise padding along, doing her best to keep up with me.

"Agnès, listen . . . to the Avenue Van Dyck? To Xavier?"

"No. First of all, I want to have a few words with Aunt Emma. I have not yet discovered the truth. No one will tell me, but I'll know how to get it out of her!"

"You must not see her!"

"Oh, I know she'll say all sorts of horrible things to me . . . but she'll also tell me what occurred between her and Xavier!"

"No, Agnès!"

"I swear that is what I'm going to do!"

"No—any such conversation would be useless. It is Emma who has sent me here."

I stopped in my tracks, and turned to her. In my haste, I had got some distance ahead. She, too, stopped. She was panting, and had one hand pressed to her heart. I went to her. She was leaning against the glazed partition. It was only then that I noticed the state she was in. She had thrown an overcoat over the clothes she had been wearing when I saw her in the flat.

"So it was Aunt Emma who sent you? To see me?"

"Agnès, we can't talk here. There are too many people, they are staring at us."

I opened a French door. We went down two steps and found ourselves in a garden. Aunt Louise got as far as a bench standing against one of the walls, and collapsed onto it.

"Now then, what is it she told you to say to me?"

She was gasping for breath, and the efforts she was making seemed to have softened her mood. "I find all this terribly upsetting . . . I am not made for drama!"

She began to cry. I sat down beside her. Taking a grip on myself, I did my best to comfort her. At last she spoke again.

"I must tell you first, Agnès, that as soon as you had left me I was overwhelmed with terror. This explanation you

were determined to get from Emma . . . I hurried around to the Avenue Van Dyck, but you were not there. I thought it wise to inform your aunt about what was happening. She replied that nothing in the world would induce her to see you. I said that you seemed very much determined . . . She became uneasy and tried to find some way of avoiding a scene. It was then that she asked me to talk to you on her behalf."

"Poor Aunt Louise! You have given yourself a lot of trouble for nothing. You see, you don't know anything—only Aunt Emma can answer my question."

"Just a minute . . . oh, how much better it would have been if I had not gone to the Avenue Van Dyck but stayed at home!"

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"This, Agnès. But you must promise to listen quietly until I have finished."

"I promise."

"Emma told me exactly what happened."

"She did?"

"Yes, so that I could tell you, so that she would not have to tell you herself."

"Well?"

"What she told Xavier, what threw him into such a state . . . was that very piece of evidence I told you she had been keeping up her sleeve. In order to prove to him that he could not be the father of this child, she revealed to him something about himself which he did not understand. How can I make *you* understand, Agnès? . . . Xavier does not possess all the physical characteristics of a man."

"What on earth are you talking about! It's nonsense to say that. Xavier is perfectly normal. He is my husband in every sense of the word!"

"Maybe, my child, but he can't be a father."

I thought I must be dreaming: I felt as though I were living through a nightmare, but all the while, words were boring their way into my head, words to which the hospital setting seemed to give an appalling element of authority . . . at Davos, when he reached the age of puberty, symptoms of tuberculosis of the genital organs . . . an operation which had been successful, but had left a blockage . . . a boy who had grown into a man . . . a healthy, virile human being, but one incapable of fatherhood—though that he did not know . . . doctors who, thinking him too young, had not broken this news directly to him, but had thought it best to tell his godmother because she was to him as a mother . . . and she . . .

"Oh!" Aunt Louise cried. "I don't doubt her word. I am sure that she was acting in good faith when she put off telling Xavier . . . he is so impressionable! And besides, because of the state of his health, she saw him so seldom. Emma kept on postponing the terrible moment. And then, two days ago, under the pressure of circumstances . . ."

I heard a voice saying: "Yes, so as to make it clear that the child was illegitimate. . . ."

The voice was mine.

I remained sitting on the bench. Stupidly, I found myself remembering the stratagem I had employed with the Mortier girl, how I had evoked the haunting shadow of disease to bring her marriage to nothing. My lie had turned against

me. Worse still, that lie had been the expression of a truth. . . .

At last I got up. I led Aunt Louise to the far end of the garden. There, for the last time, I remained for a while in silence. My thoughts, unconsciously, had discovered the real motives lying behind my family's behavior. In a low voice, I said, "This marriage of ours was so convenient, it settled everything. They let us marry without a word of warning. . . . Aunt Emma! Oh, what a woman!"

I was aware that I had never before spoken that name in just that tone, with such profound conviction. Aunt Louise knew it, too.

"Oh God!" she said, and began to cry again. "I can guess what you are thinking. But be merciful! After all, she is my sister. If only you could see her at this moment. She has had a severe attack. Her sufferings are enough to make her scream. It is for that reason I agreed to speak for her, for that reason that she asked me to!"

"No, Aunt Louise, that is not why she sent you to me, why she has shut herself away in her room. The real reason is that she is frightened."

"Frightened?"

"Yes, frightened of what I may do."

4.

"NO CHANGE," the nurse told me, "he has not come out of the coma."

She could see that I was deeply distressed. But stunned

and tormented though I might be, there was no longer any need to fear the form my reaction might take. Of my own accord I kept my voice low. No need now to keep me out of the drawing room. We had only to withdraw into the corner farthest from Xavier's bed.

"What does this unchanging condition indicate, mademoiselle? Tell me what you honestly think."

"It is impossible to say anything definite, madame."

"You are afraid to give me your opinion, is that it? Perhaps you have been warned against me, told that I am excitable?"

"Madame, I listen only to what the doctors tell me."

"Which doctor was it who sent for you—Dr. Oswald?"

"Yes, I work mostly for him."

"Good. I have just seen him at the hospital. He told me he hoped it might be possible to arrive at a prognosis this evening. But you, who are with my husband all the time . . ."

"There is nothing I can tell you, madame. So far there has been no hemorrhage, but it may occur at any moment, and without the slightest warning. Dr. Oswald himself could say no more than that. This evening perhaps . . ."

The long day stretched before me like a tunnel. At the far end lay the consultation, a tiny spot of daylight. What awaited me? Catastrophe, or peace of mind? And until then . . .

"Mademoiselle, I want to stay with my husband. If that is a breach of the regulations, I beg you to phone Dr. Oswald on the telephone and ask for his authorization."

"I need not do that, madame. There is no reason why you should not stay here."

As soon as the door of the room had closed upon me, what was happening within it occupied the whole of my attention. The rest of this Boussardel house and its people were of no interest to me. They had ceased even to be real. My universe, the restricted world within which I lived, had dwindled to the narrow bed on which the man into whose hands I had surrendered my future lay suspended between life and death.

How had I come by this new wisdom? Was it true to say that what I had learned about my kith and kin had set a gulf between us? Had they gone too far—so far that I could now look upon them only as strangers? No: I was well aware that it was Xavier lying there on his iron bedstead, so like the beds in the wards of the hospital; Xavier, struck down and helpless, who had calmed the fever in my mind. I was bound to him by a sense of something in him unreal, the sight of his hands which could not touch, the echo of the words he could not speak yet which I seemed to hear, the sight of his sealed eyes. Strange bonds to unite us so closely! A strange couple, Xavier and I!

I did not wish to leave this drawing room which had become the theatre of his sickness. I could not help him in any way, or be of use to him, I who had loaded upon his back the burden of my unhappiness. But I felt he was protecting me; that by keeping me between these four walls, he was shielding me against myself, against the proximity of my family, against the temptation, still strong in me, to seek

them out upstairs where they lurked and fling my insults in their faces. . . .

Mademoiselle Bury, for such was the nurse's name, said nothing. We sat in two small easy chairs at this far end of the room.

I kept running my finger up and down the stripes on the arm of this unfamiliar chair, and letting my eyes wander over the walls, the pale green damask hangings, the Aubusson tapestries of this room, usually so lifeless, but now, for me, due to the presence of a small iron bed, become sensitized and peopled by a concourse of feelings.

"If I spend the night," I said, "I will sleep over there."

I pointed to the sofa on which the pregnant Jeanne-Simon had received the guests the night of the party.

"Yes, madame," replied the nurse. "I expect you must be worn out. You should have something to eat, if only to keep up your strength."

"I'm not hungry."

"You must make yourself eat. You are going to need all your strength."

Foreseeing, perhaps, another objection of a different kind, she added, "You can have food brought to you next door, in the gallery, within sound of my voice, and while you are eating I can let Mademoiselle Boussardel come in here for a few moments. . . ."

Aunt Emma! I did not reply at once. It was the first time since the nature of the mystery had been made plain to me that I had really considered the possibility of finding myself face to face with Aunt Emma. But now I knew that at any

instant that meeting might take place. . . . I did not wish to shut my eyes to the truth, to spare myself by laying upon her the whole responsibility! Had she not admitted her guilt by sending her sister to me? Had she not confessed by her actions how much worse than my own trivial fall from grace had been what she had done?

I was no longer thinking about what she had done to me when she had let the marriage go through without telling me what she knew. From now on, I mattered little. In the first immediate shock of that revelation, I had felt a deep personal resentment. But now it was upon Xavier that all my capacities for pain were concentrated. It was of him that I was thinking. It was against him that the crime had been committed. His life might have been happy. It had been necessary only for her to speak in time. Having reached her decision earlier, she was free to choose the right moment. She could have been circumspect, could have led up to the moment when she might have told what she knew, and softened the blow by suggesting a further recourse to medical opinion. Perhaps Xavier and I might have married in any case. So far as my own problem was concerned, I might have found some other solution. What it would have been I do not know, but at least it need not have involved such tragedy as this.

I knew Xavier. What had overwhelmed him with disgust the previous evening had not been the revelation of his physical defect. That, after all, was not like a bodily deformity, glaringly obvious, and would have affected only a small part of his life. No, it was the realization that on two separate occasions an attempt had been made to palm him off,

by the simple procedure of concealing that same defect, precisely as the malformation of an animal at market is concealed because if it is not, the money value will be less. It was for that reason that my aunt had acted, with more thoughtlessness and irresponsibility than cynicism. The truth that would have been so dangerous to reveal at the time of the Mortier project had, on the second occasion, become doubly so, since in the interval the difficulty of marrying Xavier off had become glaringly obvious. So all hopes had come to be concentrated on an Agnès of whom the family had long despaired. And so it was that the dear god-mother had held her peace. If, at long last, she had abandoned her silence, it was because she had been carried away by anger at seeing imposed upon the family a child that did not belong to it, at seeing a new claimant for a share of the Boussardel property who had no legitimate claim. The decisive factor had been, not a conscience tardily awakened, nor even the fear of scandal, but the dread of seeing the family pocket picked!

The act had been that of an ignorant old maid, a lonely, half-mad old woman suffering from an excess of gall!

I could feel my cheeks hot with anger. I had not yet given my answer to the nurse, who was proposing to let that woman visit the sickroom.

"Don't you think that is a good plan, madame?" murmured Mademoiselle Bury.

She posed the question as a statement, and took from it any hint of interrogation. She meant: The most sensible solution will be to let Mademoiselle Boussardel come in here

by way of the other room while you are having your dinner. So *that's* settled. . . .

My eyes sought Xavier. Motionless, at the far end of the room, he nevertheless seemed to be giving his assent.

It was then that I said, "I agree, Mademoiselle Bury. Yes, while I am having my dinner."

I dined in the gallery, on a bridge table. It was brought to me not by Emile but by the young footman who had been on duty that morning in the Hall, and had, also, with the same air of indifference, opened the door to me on my return from America. His fatuous face had become to me the very sign and symbol of the house.

I knew that my aunt was in the room next door, and, to give her a full measure of time, I lingered over my meal. My patient could neither see nor hear, and so was safe from additional suffering.

I had completely recovered, and decided to forget myself entirely. I could at least manage to forget my rancor. From now on, I would think only of Xavier.

I had intended to wait where I was until Mademoiselle Bury came to summon me back. But suddenly the door opened and I heard a voice say, "He is coming out of the coma!"

Instantly I was on my feet. An impulse such as I had never known seemed to carry me forward . . . to witness the manifestation of I knew not what pitying destiny . . . above all, to Xavier who had consented to come back to life. . . .

I ran. The enemy had left the field. My aunt, at the first sign of returning consciousness, had withdrawn. I bent over the bloodless face swathed in bandages. I whispered, "I am here . . . I am with you . . . it is Agnès . . ."

His eyes were still shut, but at the sound of my voice, the lids flickered and half opened. As though to encourage the effort he was making, I said again, "I am here. . . you can see me, can't you? Xavier, darling."

Then the lids parted and revealed the light within. He saw me, he looked at me. His face was still powerless to make any movement. It expressed nothing, but I knew that deep inside himself, Xavier was smiling. Oh, God be praised! He had forgiven me for the part I had played in the evil thing that had been done to him. . . . How could I ever have doubted that he would?

I was trembling all over. Mademoiselle Bury forced me into a chair, thus setting a small distance between us.

In a low voice, she said, "He mustn't try to speak."

"Don't worry . . . I give you my word." And to Xavier, "Don't speak . . . don't move . . . I'm not going to leave you."

I slipped my hand between his motionless fingers and the sheet. "You see . . . I can't go away now without you noticing it."

Already the lids had drooped again over his eyes. I breathed once more, filled with a mad hope. I knew, without a hint of doubt, what it was that mattered! I stiffened myself against this surge of emotion, against the threat of collapse in which it might end. At last I could feel the warm tears on my cheeks. But I could not relax. My nerves

had hold of me. Slowly, gradually, I began to sob. Lest my sobs should be communicated to the sick man's hand and trouble his peace, Mademoiselle gripped my wrist in her fingers and held it steady. Whether because of that, or because I feared to trouble Xavier, I almost immediately grew calm.

Xavier continued his peaceful slumber. I was alone with him, for Mademoiselle had gone off for her own dinner.

After a long pause, I thought I could detect in the fingers touching mine a faint vibration, like the fragile return of consciousness. Shortly afterwards, his eyes opened once more.

I stood up and leaned over him, whispering, "I am still here . . . don't worry."

Life came back into his lips, as it had into his eyes. They trembled, they parted; first one, then the other, moved.

"Do you want a drink? Are you in pain? Shall I call the nurse?"

A look of apprehension showed in his eyes, and prevented me from sounding the alarm.

I knew that there was something he wanted to say to me. Twice, a faint spasm passed across his face. I could see the spirit rising from the distant place where it had taken refuge, from those depths, not to be measured by our human scale, which belong to another world. An indistinct muttering reached my ears, but I could not make out its meaning. "What is it you want to tell me?"

The sound came again, still unintelligible but already distinctly separated into two parts. I shook my head to show that I could not understand. I wondered subconsciously

whether it would be more imprudent to let him go on trying than to stop him from talking and so thwart his purpose?

I leaned closer. With every scrap of my being I tried to read some meaning into the strange muttering. I thought I could distinguish two sounds: *way . . . em*. But what did they mean? A new dread touched me . . . was Xavier's mind affected, his spirit darkened? No. The look in his eyes reassured me . . . And then, suddenly propelled outwards by sheer force of will, the words came clearly to my ears: "Away from them!"

5.

THE consultation had been set for six o'clock. A whole afternoon to wait! I no longer felt as though I were in a tunnel. The way ahead had become daylight-clear. I had a hundred projects in my mind. But above all I was debating with myself how best I might obey Xavier in this matter of getting him away from the family.

About four I once more left the room and went out of the house. I returned with my handbag stuffed with pamphlets. As soon as my patient should once more be conscious, I would hold before his eyes these illustrated leaflets which showed the latest types of ambulances. I had found an establishment which undertook long-distance road transport and had at its disposal cars of the very latest design. I had been shown one of these which was kept always in readiness

for an emergency. It was roomy and beautifully equipped. The really exorbitant price which had been quoted for a journey of nearly five hundred miles almost delighted me. I *wanted* it to cost me a lot. I could never pay enough for the joy of taking Xavier "away from them."

To be on the safe side, I told Mademoiselle Bury nothing about my plans. Indeed, she had no inkling that Xavier had actually spoken to me. But happiness must have shown in my face, because more than once I saw her look at me with astonishment.

Finally, I could hold myself in no longer. "I don't know what I can have been thinking about not to have told you sooner," I whispered. "But while you were having your dinner, my husband actually spoke two or three words . . . It is a good sign that he talked, isn't it?"

In reply she only pursed her lips as people do who wish to avoid committing themselves.

But, finally, she did explain that a momentary interval of lucidity, in cases like his, did not necessarily mean that all danger of complications had passed.

Still in a hushed voice, I exclaimed, "There are different types of lucidity. I *know* my husband will be all right now."

The two doctors came into the room together. Behind them, my Aunt Emma was in the gallery through the open door. She took a few steps forward and was about to follow them in. She had plucked up courage to face me, but only in their presence, for she undoubtedly thought that with them there, I should not indulge in any manifestation of

hostility. She was right, except that she mistook my motive. I did nothing to keep her from crossing the threshold and walking toward where I was standing by Xavier's bed.

I turned my head to face Aunt Emma. She stood as motionless and as upright as I did, her hands, like mine, crossed in front of her. But her eyes never left the two doctors as they leaned over the expressionless face of the patient. I could not help wondering whether her rigidity was occasioned by the pain she was feeling at sight of Xavier, or by her obstinate determination not to see Agnès.

Turning my head still further, I noticed another group at the far end of the room. Other members of the family, similarly emboldened by the conviction that the circumstances would force me to control myself, had entered to be present at the consultation, though they were careful to stay at a respectful distance. Uncle Théodore was there with my aunts Julianne and Louise, my two brothers, my mother.

They endured my stare, though I was sure they were glad the gravity of the moment made it unnecessary for them to speak any word of greeting to me. Only my mother looked away.

She had dropped her usual mask of the easygoing matron and wore instead the expression I am sure Mary Magdalene had at the foot of the Cross. Behind that disguise, however, her eyes were shifty. Never once did I succeed in catching them, so skillfully did she control their movement. The only evidence of the uneasiness she must have felt was the two spreading half-moons of sweat under the arms of her dress.

The doctors finished their examination and went into the

larger drawing room. While they were away, my aunt and I went back to the bed. She sat down in the chair I had been occupying, while I took the one on the other side which the nurse pushed toward me. The thought crossed my mind that we were not unlike the figures in a sentimental picture representing a scene of reconciliation between rivals over a sickbed. But neither of us stretched a hand to the other over Xavier's body.

The doctors returned and signed for us to follow them into the gallery. There they waited until the company was all assembled. Dr. Mesureur tried the door separating the drawing room from the gallery, to make sure that it had been closed by Valentin who had been the last to pass through it. Then he began to speak:

"My dear friends, both Dr. Oswald and I should be much to blame if we let you suppose for a moment that the situation is not alarming, more than alarming. It seems to us—"

I uttered a cry which interrupted his words. This time all eyes were turned on me. But I did not care. I gripped Dr. Oswald by the shoulders: I had made for him instinctively.

"Surely, you must be wrong! Doctor, you are wrong, aren't you? He spoke to me, he seemed better . . ."

But I could get nothing from him but silence, and a look that was only too eloquent.

Mesureur had led the other members of the family to the far end of the gallery.

Very gently, Oswald said, "If you like, I will look in again after dinner—unless, in the meantime, you have sent for me."

I could only stammer, "What? Oh yes . . . yes . . . certainly . . . oh, doctor, this is too dreadful!"

He took my hands in his. Was it that he wanted to calm me, or did he wish to express his sympathy? I broke free and then, in my turn, seized him by the wrists. Leaning close to him, I whispered, "But that means that he will die . . . here!"

When Dr. Oswald came back at half past nine, he could no longer give me the least hope. Having examined Xavier for the last time, he embarked upon a long and technical explanation. The irreparable had occurred. The delayed hemorrhage, and the subsequent compression which he had feared, had taken place. Nothing further could be done.

"Madame, the end will be very peaceful. I do not know whether Dr. Mesureur has spoken as bluntly to your family as I have spoken to you, whether he has made it clear to them that death can only be a matter of time. But I wish to conceal nothing from you. What, this afternoon, you took for sleep, was already the beginning of the final coma. It will become deeper and deeper. I should be guilty of a gross deception if I allowed you to hope that death might even be delayed. The only advice I can still give you is not to move from your husband's side if you wish to be present when he breathes his last."

"How long, doctor . . ." I was amazed to find that I could express myself coherently. I realized then that life's dramatic moments come very simply. "How long will it take for him to die?"

"It is difficult to say with any accuracy. It may take a fairly

long time. I doubt whether anything will happen until the early hours of the morning. But it is most unlikely, in my opinion, that he will last through another night."

For a while I said nothing. Dr. Oswald, far from taking advantage of my silence to say good-by, remained seated with his elbow on the arm of the chair I had offered him.

"So, doctor, there is no ground for hope. . . . My husband can no longer hear me, and will never hear me again?"

"Yes," he said simply, "nor will his eyes ever open again."

"And you are positive that nothing anyone could do could possibly delay the end?"

This time he merely shook his head.

"In that case," I said, "the presence of the nurse . . ."

I left the sentence unfinished, but there was a questioning look in his eyes.

"If I could be sure that Mademoiselle Bury's presence is not absolutely essential, and that I might to some extent take her place . . ."

"You would like to be left alone with your husband?"

"Yes, doctor."

"I see no reason why you should not, in a case like this where there are no risks. The situation, alas, can terminate in only one way. I will have a word with the nurse. She will explain to you the measures which still, as a matter of form, have to be taken, and naturally, she will spend the night in the gallery."

"I had thought it might be better to have a bed made up for her in the linen closet. It would be difficult to have one brought in here, and why should she be obliged to sleep in an armchair? This will be her third night on duty . . . she

would still be on the ground floor. If I need her, I can ring. We can arrange a special signal."

I stopped speaking. He did not reply at once, but looked at me. For the first time I lowered my eyes.

"Doctor, I don't want to have to insist, but I think I have a right to make this request. I beg you, therefore . . ."

There must have been something convincing in the tone of my voice, for whatever it was he may have been thinking, he suddenly touched my hand and I felt calmer.

"Only," he said with a faint smile, "you do understand, don't you, that I have no authority to prevent your family . . ."

"Oh, I'll look after them!"

I spoke decisively. The doctor may have mistaken my meaning, for he hastened to add, "But there, perhaps, I am treading on delicate ground. . . ."

"You have no reason to worry about that. I have at last learned the truth. It came to me this morning from the mouth of that relative of mine whom you may have noticed at the hospital when you were making your rounds. I am afraid you have been pitched into the middle of a somewhat unusual family situation."

He stood up, and I did the same. We faced one another.

"I can assure you, madame, that we doctors are used to this sort of thing—that phrase, I might add, is our standard reply. But in the present circumstances it may seem to be ill-timed, because . . ."

He did not finish. This young man, so sure in his craft, was very shy when dealing with matters outside his professional province. I held out my hand.

"Thank you for everything, monsieur."

"I have one last piece of very different advice to give you. Look after yourself."

"The nurse has already said much the same thing—you are referring, no doubt, to my condition? But I have time, plenty of time, doctor, in which to give my attention to the life within me."

"That life is not the only one that calls for your care. There is also . . ."

"Yes?"

"Your own."

"You sent for us?" Simon said.

"Yes, let us all three sit down. But there is no need for you to be so on your guard—it really would not be worth the effort. I am not going to embarrass you. I wish to speak to both of you in order to put an end to all discussion, in order to have done with all this ill will—including my own. That would not be possible if I were talking with Aunt Emma or my mother. In any case, I am prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps you were left in ignorance—as I was?"

Valentin raised a hand.

"I have no wish to know whether I am right or wrong in that supposition. In any case, it is you I want to talk to. You are of my generation and, after all, you *are* my brothers."

"Go ahead," Simon said, "we are listening."

"Yes, Agnès," said Valentin, with less assurance, "we're listening."

"What I have to say can be said quickly, and in very few

words. Xavier is going to die. I intend that he shall be left alone with me. That is all."

The two brothers were obviously taken aback. They exchanged a look. As I had foreseen, it was with Simon that I should now be involved. He would show himself the harder of the two.

"You are not, I imagine, demanding—"

I cut him short.

"Then you are imagining wrong. That is precisely what I am doing. I want to remain alone with Xavier to the end. I want no third person here—and I do not refer to the nurse."

"You can't behave like that to Aunt Emma!"

"I can, and very easily."

Simon was far too cautious to insist. He knew that my mind was made up.

"All right," he said. "I shall transmit your wishes; *we* shall transmit your wishes."

"Yes," agreed Valentin.

"You understand, I hope, that if there is any opposition to this request of mine, I will have to present my reasons for it to the doctors. As you can see, I am quite determined. But I am sure the others will wish to avoid a painful scene, as I do. What possible point would there be in it? I should be in so much the stronger position."

"I find your reasoning a little surprising," said Simon. "This is positively the first time I have seen you deliberately taking sides with slander. Up till now . . ."

I raised my hand.

"My poor Simon! If only you knew, if only you all knew, how completely apart I feel now from the whole business."

"All right!" said Simon, pressing with his two hands on the arms of his chair as though about to get up. "In that case, there can't be much more you have to say to us?"

"All the same, Simon . . . are you really in such a hurry? Don't let us part quite yet. Who knows how long it may be before we again have such an opportunity for a cozy chat?"

"Why must you always dramatize things?"

"I think that I am not the only one guilty of *that* fault. . . . Valentin, will you tell them that if anyone wants to see Xavier again, now is the time, while I am out of the room. But tell them, please, to go by way of the large drawing room, and to go quickly."

"Ah!" Simon sighed, lighting a cigarette. "I've always said you're not bad at heart. What a pity that all these misunderstandings . . ."

"Please, Simon, don't be puerile! You must admit the latest of these misunderstandings, as you call them, was not exactly on the small side. Can't you see now, can't all of them see, how stupid the revelation made to Xavier was? Xavier *knew* that I was pregnant!"

"So Aunt Louise informed them this morning."

"And, no doubt, it gave them such a shock that they haven't recovered from it yet?"

"How could they possibly have imagined . . ."

"They must have known very little about me if they really thought me capable of—what was Aunt Emma's phrase?—of 'tricking' Xavier! As though I should have tricked Xavier—tricked the man I was going to marry! And Xavier of all people! You can't have known very much about him, either. . . . And why, since I was the guilty party, should

he be the one to be punished? Would you like my honest opinion, Simon? I think they prefer always to strike at the weakest. . . . You and I know that only too well."

"You are wrong! Xavier *had* to be told. Nothing else would have been of any use. He was the only person who could stand up to you, and in order to do that, he had to have a weapon. . . . To think that at the very moment of your engagement, when we were all so happy . . ."

"Please don't trouble to explain what I know perfectly well already. Shall *I* tell *you* why the family was so delighted to think that we were going to get married? It wasn't just that two people had decided to become man and wife, it wasn't just that they saw a way of killing two birds with one stone . . . no, the main reason was that from this union there could never come any children. *That* was the crowning mercy, *that* was why joy reigned unconfined, *that* was what produced all the magnificent gestures, the princely generosity. In our case, it wasn't money thrown away. What was given to *us* would return later."

"You're talking as though we were self-seeking!"

"Well, aren't you?"

"Self-seeking! *We*?"

"Oh, Simon! It's *me* you're talking to. Agnès!"

He blew a cloud of smoke to the ceiling. I could see that he was annoyed.

"Money wasn't the only question, you know that as well as I do. . . . The family honor was also involved. I don't want to hurt you, Agnès, but you must realize that this child of yours is an . . . an unknown quantity. Yet you intended that it should bear our name. Put yourself in our place. It

was *that* they wanted to prevent. And you can't say that what the family did failed."

"What do you mean?"

"We know now we won't have among us a child recognized as a Boussardel who is no such thing."

"Listen to me . . ." I put my hand to my forehead. I thought I must have misunderstood him, that my mind was not working properly. Here we were in the picture gallery, only a few feet from where Xavier lay dying, and already speaking of him in the past tense. I made an effort to bring some semblance of order to my thoughts:

"Hear me, Simon. Nothing can prevent me from having my baby. It will be born in October."

"I know that. Since you have private means, you will be in a position to bring it up. But at least, after what has happened, we assume that it will not be registered as Xavier's child. On the other hand, so far as you are concerned . . ."

"So that's what you're hoping, is it?"

His silence gave me all the answer I needed. During the pause that followed I watched him sitting there, a stocky figure, strong, richly endowed with offspring—all of them, of course, legitimate.

"If I am not dreaming, Simon, this child which Xavier has accepted, about whose paternity he never once asked . . . this child to which he was so much looking forward, whom he already loved—this child which Xavier living recognized as his own, you now want Xavier dead to disown. . . . Is that it?"

My heart was filled with bitterness. It was as though the same deathly sickness, the same desire to vomit, which had

overcome Xavier, now rose in me. Instinctively, I raised my hand to my mouth. But only a sickly laugh issued from it. "Ha-ha-ha! The Boussardels really are the most amazing family!"

All I wanted now was to have done with this conversation. I could not even bring myself to raise my voice.

"Never, Simon—and get this quite clear. Calmly and quietly I say it: *never*. So don't count on that. Make a scandal if you like, start an action in the courts to get my child's paternity repudiated, but it is Xavier's name which it is going to bear. Make your depositions, produce your proofs. Go before a magistrate and declare that you, as a family, married a normal young woman to a sterile young man, without a word to either of them."

"Don't confuse the issue! Let us assume for the sake of argument that you did not deceive Xavier, that it was we who deceived you. Nothing you can say will alter the fact that you have been guilty of an action . . ."

"Spare me your sermon, Simon. I have not lived my life on any precepts laid down by you. Except for Xavier, I have never recognized, and still do not see any of you who could make me admit his right to question my conduct. To him I was prepared to listen—he, alone, was entitled to judge others. That was why I went to him for advice. Your misfortune was that he offered to marry me and to acknowledge my child as his own. See how everything fits together—events now will follow the line that he laid down."

I got up from my chair and took a step toward the door leading into the Hall.

"Before we separate, Simon, I have just one more question to ask." I turned my face away before continuing. "Did mother know?"

"Know what?"

"That Xavier was what he is?"

"How can I possibly tell? Besides, what point can there be . . ."

"A great deal of point. Perhaps, after all, I am not yet quite as detached as I thought I was—changes of that kind take time. I remember how, when our engagement was announced, Mother seemed so reticent, so reserved."

"Well, what of it?"

"Only that perhaps she did know, and was uneasy. You see, I don't accuse her of always acting from selfish motives."

My elder brother, still disconcerted by my refusal to bow to their demands, tried to avoid having to answer.

"Perhaps if you had not been perpetually carping at her . . ."

He stopped, afraid that he might have said too much. Valentin, inoffensive Valentin who had always been my mother's slave, plunged ahead.

"It's perfectly true," he said. "You never miss an opportunity of taking a dig at Mamma. It's almost as though you've forgotten that she *is* your mother!"

"Oh, that's something I certainly never forget! I have never been so vividly conscious of it as at this moment! . . . But I haven't had the answer to my question."

"Why not leave her out of this?" he went on. "She knew you were trying to pick a quarrel with her."

"Really?"

"Yes. She said to me, 'Agnès'll be pleased to have a real reason for hating me!'"

Oh, the fool! I could have kissed him. The words were so completely typical of my mother! They supplied all the answer I needed. Simon had not been able to silence him in time. Now, in order at least to limit the consequences of his brother's indiscretion, he shut the door leading into the Hall, which he had just opened. I felt the flames of my old fury leap up within me. So she *had known!* . . . My mother had acquiesced in this monstrous crime . . . and now she was daring to ask whether I was . . . "Pleased?" I said to Valentin. I was trembling all over. "Tell her *yes*, and that I forgive myself for saying so!"

7. *The Flight*

I.

SO AS not to arouse Mademoiselle Bury's curiosity, I concealed the fact that I was going out again. My absence, in any case, would be brief. I had only one visit to make, and that was at no great distance.

While she was with me, I made a point of locking the two doors which communicated with the larger drawing room. When I resumed my seat at the foot of the bed, she rose

from her chair and made as though to leave me. Dr. Oswald had spoken to her.

Before she left, she passed on her instructions. She said that she would not disturb me unless I rang.

Time passed. I could detect no change in Xavier. That may have been because my eyes scarcely left him. It may also have been because there was no change possible.

I waited. Midnight came sooner than I expected. The nurse came in for a last check. I glanced at her and noticed that she had not yet taken off her clothes nor, probably, had even lain down. She examined the man on the bed, felt his pulse, and said that Dr. Oswald had been right. It did not look as if the end would come quickly.

I urged her more strongly than ever to go to bed, reminding her that I intended to stay in the room all night. I went with her to the door, which I shut when she had gone out. Without waiting until she should be out of earshot, I turned the key in the lock.

Time passed. Xavier's pulse continued to beat.

2.

I WAS impatient. But I had fixed every detail of my timetable and forced myself not to depart from it, not to cut short by even a minute the intervals I had laid down. I had reduced the risks to a minimum, planned the whole thing out by cool reasoning. I was not going to compromise the entire plan for the mere sake of relieving my feelings.

At half past one precisely, I put into my handbag a small bottle wrapped in paper. A short while before, I had stopped my taxi at a café where I had asked for a drop of oil.

I opened the French door which gave onto the side of the house. It made no noise. I moved forward as far as the courtyard and checked over one by one all the windows in this part of the house. Not a light showed in any of them. The concierge's lodge opposite was also dark. I turned back. I reached the front garden. I walked on the grass so as to avoid making any sound on the gravel. Looking up, I carefully examined this side of the house. Here, too, all was in darkness.

I had correctly guessed what their reaction would be once I had taken possession of Xavier's room. They were fast asleep. My brothers had gone to their rooms; Granny had not awakened; the other four were sleeping.

I turned into the little path between the shrubberies which led from our garden into the park. I felt my way along the railing. The darkness of the night would be of great assistance to me later on, but for the moment I found it a hindrance. Fumblingly, I emptied some of my oil on each of the hinges of the gate. Taking the key from the lock, I similarly oiled it.

I went back. There was no change in Xavier. His pulse was still beating.

At a quarter to two I again went out into the garden. The key now turned without squeaking. The gate opened. I slipped along past the dense foliage of the Park. Thirty steps or so brought me to the main gate across the upper end of the blind alley which was the Avenue Van Dyck. I knew

that it never made a sound, having often closed it at night and sometimes opened it in the morning. There was no need for a key. I had remembered that by pulling up the vertical bolt of the right section, and drawing the two parts of the gate toward me simultaneously, I could open it.

I succeeded in getting the gate open, and having done so, brought the two sections together again until they touched. From the outside they looked as if the gate was shut. I hurried back to the house with a thudding heart.

I did not sit down again, but stood watching at the window. Once more, doubtless for the last time, I was shut away in this house, standing by a window, watching.

This period of waiting was the longest I had ever known. At last, what looked like a glass-sided delivery truck, lithe and silent in the darkness, backed into the Avenue according to my instructions. When it came level with the house, the driver switched off his engine and extinguished his headlights.

I put on my hat and coat and picked up my handbag.

In a low voice I indicated to the two men the path they must take with the stretcher, and the necessary precautions. They seemed to be surprised.

I whispered to them, "Haven't you been told? Didn't your employer explain that you were to follow my instructions? He knows that I am removing my husband from a house where he is being badly looked after. I have signed a paper clearing your firm of all responsibility."

I was keeping a strong hold over myself, but my nerves were on edge. How timid these driver-orderlies were! They

must have been concerned in many more difficult jobs. Were they going to prove a stumbling-block?

"While I think of it . . . I am going to ask a good deal of you on the road. I don't want us to stop more than is absolutely necessary. I was told you would relieve one another at the wheel. All the same, it will be a pretty exhausting job for both of you. . . . Here is half the tip I propose to give you."

I handed both of them a large bank note. They took the money.

The stretcher was lifted into the car, where it became a real bed on which Xavier lay, well covered. I sat beside him, and the door was shut. I thought it wiser to tell them not to switch on any of the inside lights, not even a darkened bulb. I touched the wrist lying on the coverlet. The pulse was still beating.

The two men were ready and waiting in the front seat. I made them a sign and I heard the engine start, and then softly purr. The car slid away.

In next to no time we reached the end of the Avenue Van Dyck. My eyes left Xavier's face. I strained them to catch a last glimpse of the Boussardel mansion.

But I could not see it. It was lost in the darkness. No sudden light had appeared in any of the rooms.

Suddenly, four glowing patches of light struck downwards into my field of vision. The car had passed through the monumental gateway which faces down the whole length of the Avenue Van Dyck and divides it from the outer

world. I saw the lights high on their wrought-iron standards.

With great care we swept into the rue de Courcelles. I was still staring through the window at the huge gate. It had welcomed me home on my return from America. Now I was leaving it behind. They had shone upon my childhood: they were lighting my flight.

We took the bend. The lights became smaller. A building on the corner masked them, one after the other: three, two, one—then none at all.

3.

I FLED through Paris carrying away the still-living Xavier. As a further precaution, I had drawn all the blinds. A little light filtered into the car spasmodically as street lamp succeeded street lamp. Holding back the edge of the nearest blind with my finger, I could make out that the driver was wisely following the great boulevards which, at that hour, were deserted. In this way we were spared the necessity of making too many turns and changes of speed.

The ambulance had certainly not been overpraised by its proprietor. Once through the Porte d'Italie, the driver increased his speed and held it steady. It was then that I appreciated the admirable springs. I had not been conscious of the cobbles along the Quais, nor was I now of those in the suburbs. I raised the blind a little way. The long lines of suburban houses sped by, for we were still within the zone of street-lighting.

I grew alarmed—for Xavier. I felt as though I had been floating for hours in a sort of remote region in which neither weariness nor pain could reach me. But at least my brain was functioning and told me that Xavier still breathed, that his pulse had not ceased to beat. . . . Forgetful of the doctor's uncompromising answers to my questions, I was on the point of speaking into the miniature telephone apparatus. We must go slower. But then, I laid my hand on the stretcher and was reassured by its steadiness.

It was spring. Day began to break at Pont-sur-Yonne. In the jonquil-colored dawn I recognized the little town, still shuttered and sleeping in the broadening light.

Never before had I traveled through this part of the country at so early an hour. Villeneuve-sur-Yonne between its ancient gates, even Auxerre, were sleeping. The first signs of waking life appeared at Avallon, and Saint-Philibert de Tournus lay full in the glow of a ten-o'clock sun. We had made good time. By now, in the Avenue Van Dyck, they must have discovered the disappearance of a dying man spirited away by a madwoman.

When the car entered the outskirts of Lyon, so sharp a pain struck my heart that I caught my breath. I felt as though I were suffocating. I was terrified; I could not calm my agitation. "If only I could cry," I thought. "Tears would give me back my balance."

But no tears came. The picture swiftly conjured up, to vanish again as quickly, of Xavier as I had seen him when he sat waiting for me at Mère Bricot's restaurant, sunburned, handsome, his eyes shining. I glanced at him as he lay before

me, the waxen, ashen face, the closed eyelids made me realize the extent to which he had already withdrawn from this world, the uselessness of moving these remnants of the flesh from which the spirit had been emptied. In a surge of terror, I stretched out my hand. His pulse was still beating.

We had to stop for a minute to allow the drivers to purchase sandwiches and coffee. While they did so, I pulled the blind down to the bottom, so as not to see the streets and riverside of Lyon.

I had by now got so used to continually feeling Xavier's pulse that the gesture had become almost a reflex. I forced myself to limit it to only once every half-hour. After the first half-hour had passed, a morbid scruple made me wait another fifteen minutes. By such whimsies was revealed the extent of my unbalance. When the new time limit had been reached, I still held back. I dared not feel his pulse again.

On we went, down the valley of the Rhône. But I had not again raised the blind. I no longer wanted to see the countryside or the towns through which we were traveling. I did not want to recognize the road or the places, to reckon the time of our probable arrival at Hyères, just as I no longer wanted to check Xavier's pulse.

The truth of the matter was that I wanted to remain ignorant, for as long as possible, of the condition he would be in when we reached Cap Baïou. I neither felt his pulse, looked at the country we were passing through, nor consulted my watch. I seemed to hang suspended in time and space halfway between life and death.

"I mustn't let my mind wander, or lose my head. That would be the last straw!"

I realized then that I was feverish. I was not going to start feeling my own pulse. Suddenly I found myself struggling against a fit of giddiness. . . . I uttered a cry . . . a faint cry.

I pressed my two hands to my stomach. The blood seemed to rush to my heart. A sensation for which I could find no name had gripped my bowels. . . . My child had moved for the first time.

Instantly I stretched a trembling hand to Xavier's wrist. His pulse was no longer beating.

When we reached Toulon the two men told me that they hoped to get to Hyères before eleven that night. They therefore intended to stop no longer than was necessary to fill up with gas. They would dine with easier minds once they had got the patient safely on board the boat, unless, of course, I needed their help to get him ashore and carried to the house.

"If you wouldn't very much mind," I said, "I should be enormously grateful if you would do that."

I wanted to make use of their kindness and discretion to the last. The presence of two such professionals would be most helpful, especially in dealing with the fisher-folk of Hyères whom we must persuade to make the trip in spite of the lateness of the hour.

"Besides," I added, "it would be far better not to move him from the stretcher until he can be taken straight to bed."

I left them to interpret this remark of mine as they pleased. As a matter of fact, I felt sure that Xavier's body was already stiff.

I begged them, nevertheless, not to have dinner at Toulon, and promised that a meal should be served to them in my house before they left again for the mainland. There was, alas, no longer any urgency, but I was fearful of any circumstance which might have revealed the fact that I was transporting a dead body to the island. There would have been endless questions, explanations, formalities. . . . There must be not a moment's delay.

When I had taken note—not of Xavier's last breath, since that I had let go unseen and unheard—but Xavier's absence, I did not cover his face with the sheet. I knew that in order to get him on board and taken off again, he would have to be carried through the crowd waiting in the darkness, with his face uncovered, as at a Spanish funeral. But this night would not surround him with the same shadows as those of the night just past. The weather had changed since we had left Burgundy. Xavier's dead eyes would dwell on the vault of a Latin sky with all its brilliant stars. His unhearing ears would vibrate to the lap of water on the hulls of fishing-boats, and the sea breeze would blow in the hair which, for some days still, would retain the similitude of life.

Once the island was reached, we covered the distance between the harbor and the house on foot. I had a feeling that the two men, though they said nothing, had understood. The truth had dawned on them when they were in the boat, and perhaps even before that. A few fishermen, awakened by the noise of our landing, pressed around us, for they had loved Xavier, and accompanied the stretcher through the village. Then, after I had assured them that we no longer

needed their help, they left us to complete the journey alone.

Two men in uniform carrying a dead man, his face uncovered, followed by a dry-eyed woman in traveling dress, comprised the whole of the funeral procession. It moved forward along a sandy lane between sweet-smelling bushes. The crickets sang their song.

As we approached La Petite-Combe, we heard the frogs as well. We moved without a sound. They stopped their croaking only at the last moment, then very quickly, as soon as we had passed, resumed their concert.

When he had been placed on the big divan in the studio, and our weeping servant had been sent into the kitchen, where the two orderlies were waiting, I remained shut in the room with my dead. For me the time of action was over: there was nothing for me to do now but wait.

I felt as though I were rising, little by little, to the surface of myself. Bitter regret, tenderness, a great flood of self-pity, and my womanly weakness—all these things were granted to me, one by one. At last I could again shed those tears which had so cruelly been withheld from me through all the twenty hours of the journey. I collapsed in sobs beside the outstretched body.

I did nothing now but weep for Xavier. All else had been forgotten. I did not weep for the lover gone, nor yet for the husband. I wept for the man who had given me his strength, who had saved me from others and from myself, who had made of me a better woman. I had never been sufficiently responsive to so many gifts! Confident, thanks to him, in the future, I had not properly discharged my debt. What had I given in exchange? A fearful death.

After the grief, after the remorse, it was exhaustion that seized and struck at me. I lost consciousness.

When I came to myself it was bright day. I had fallen asleep beside the corpse. I did not remember at once that Xavier was no longer alive, for a familiar weight was heavy on my left shoulder. In the depths of sleep, unconsciously, by habit, I had taken his head upon my breast, and so we had slept on.

4.

HE RESTS in the little cemetery by the harbor where the inhabitants of the island are no longer buried. I was able to buy a plot of ground there. I tend his grave myself. One morning, about a month after his death, I found a great wreath of pearl beads laid upon the stone. It did not take me long to guess whose hand had placed it there. My servant, who told me all the news of the island, confirmed my suspicion. I felt no emotion. The wreath bore no inscription, and this show of discretion on the part of Aunt Emma who, no doubt, had thought that I should find an anonymous tribute less offensive, seemed to me artless rather than indelicate. Xavier's death, and the days which had followed it, had brought to my spirit a sort of desolate peace little suited to the harboring of feelings of resentment. Besides, I was growing heavy, and that too changes a woman. I let the wreath remain.

It is regularly renewed each year. But my aunt has put in

only two appearances. I gather that the duty of making the pilgrimage and depositing the offering is discharged by the representative of a firm in Hyères, who comes for that sole purpose on the same date every year.

This is the sole contact I have maintained with my family. The bonds between us have been reduced to a lacework collection of old-fashioned and funerary beads.

I never wanted to see the Avenue Van Dyck again, and up to the moment of telling you my story, I have not set eyes on it. One morning, at the beginning of October, Granny dozed off into her last sleep. Somebody, Aunt Emma or my mother, I think, passed the word about in the family that she had died of grief, that I had killed her. The probability that this was so is remote, seeing in what state of complete indifference the old lady had spent her last years, and that her age, ninety-three, would seem to indicate a death from natural causes.

I was informed of the event by telegram, but only at second hand, the message having been dispatched by our cousin, Jarnaux, the family lawyer. Up to that moment, not one of my relatives, not even my Aunt Louise, had given a sign they knew I was still alive. That being so, was I to interpret the announcement as an invitation to the funeral? I hesitated. I was near my time. I wired condolences to my father, to my uncle, and to my aunts Emma and Louise. I was careful to repeat the same words four separate times, fearing that otherwise, and in spite of myself, I might have sent too brief and dry a message to Aunt Emma. To my brothers I wrote a letter explaining the reason which made

it impossible for me to risk so tiring a journey. My child was already protecting me.

It was not until ten weeks later that I received a letter from my Aunt Louise. With an embarrassment ill disguised by the excellent reasons she produced, she gave me to understand that she was coming to pay me a visit at Cap Baïou—*unless, she added, you write putting me off, in the unhappy event of your not being at home on the date named.* Fearful as ever, she was making it easy for me to refuse to see her. She explained that her husband had been awarded an Academy prize, and that they were taking advantage of the New Year holidays to renew their memories of Monaco. I wrote back saying that I should be expecting them.

As was her habit, she was careful to avoid raising any subject which might seem to be awkward. In talking to her, I quite naturally mentioned Xavier's name, but I saw a look of uneasiness in her face and hurriedly changed the subject. She seemed to be reassured when she saw her sister's wreath in the cemetery. After that she chatted more freely, and I realized that her sole reason in coming was to give me a kiss. She very much hoped, she said, that I would remain on affectionate terms with the rue Rennequin, adding that, if ever I came to Paris, I must certainly have luncheon with them. But this invitation was confined to the rue Rennequin, and even that concession was, for her, extremely daring.

The only allusion, if I may call it one, which she made to what had happened was to ask, on her return from the cemetery, whether there was anything I needed, and whether I did not find my lonely life on the little island hanging rather heavy on me. I replied that I had my son.

"Ah! that is true," she said, "you have your child! Often in the last few months I have said to your uncle 'At least she has the child!'"

Yet in speaking thus she was probably thinking more about herself, a wife without children, than about me, a mother without a husband.

My servant's little girl ran to meet us in the lane: there was a gentleman, she said, waiting for me up at the house.

"I know who that is," I replied, with a gesture in the direction of my aunt. "It is this lady's husband."

My uncle had aged greatly in the last two months, and the walk I had suggested to the cemetery by way of the southerly coast road where the scenery is more varied had rather frightened him.

"Oh no!" said the child. "It isn't that gentleman, but another one as has come all the way from Paris with a lady. They comed from the harbor in Saturnin's car while you was walking the long way round." Then, having kept the most interesting part of her news to the end, she added, "Says he's your brother."

"My brother?" I turned to my aunt. "Which of them?"

"It can't be Simon, he's at the winter sports and won't be back until the fifteenth of January."

"Well then, it must be Valentin, with Hélène. . . . I wonder what they're after! It must be something important to make them come all this way in winter, without even being sure of finding me."

"Don't forget the New Year holidays, Agnès. They began yesterday. That was why we . . ."

"Yes, but Valentin! Did you know he was coming?"

"No."

I could see that she was telling the truth. Something, however, was agitating her.

We neither of us said anything more, but we hastened our steps. The coincidence of these two visits set me thinking. Had the Valentins, as well as my uncle and aunt, come in the hope of re-establishing relations with me? That was something I had not anticipated. On the contrary, I had assumed that my family would treat me as one dead, and would make no further contact with me except through Cousin Jarnaux, or rather, through his senior clerk. But, lo and behold, two couples—the least hardened, to be sure, of the band—had come to see me. Were they spying out the land? Would some of the others follow later? . . . Perhaps the passing of Granny, that symbolic figure, had been the cause of this unexpected emancipation. Perhaps, now that the keystone had been removed, the weaker stones were about to fall, the whole edifice to collapse. . . .

And I alone was the reason of this expedition! . . . I cannot say that I was conscious of any wicked pleasure in the occurrence, such as I might have felt in the old days, but I did regard the whole thing as a handsome gesture, a happy thought. To say the least, I had been wrong about Valentin. . . .

He received me with a great demonstration of affection, and Hélène clasped me in her arms with a plausible show of welcome. They made no mystery of the reason for their journey. They wanted to see me. They had thought it would be pleasant to take me by surprise. Having driven down to

the coast, they might, perhaps, continue along as far as Cannes. But I was the main reason for their trip.

I gave them tea in the studio. It was growing dark. There we all were, the five of us, dressed in black—for, out of respect for my aunt, I had resumed my widow's weeds. But I could not help wondering for whom this general mourning was being displayed: Granny? Xavier? Or somebody else?

Valentin, who was sitting beside me, leaned closer and murmured in my ear, "There is something I want to talk to you about."

I turned quickly and faced him. He had lowered his voice and adopted that whispering tone which I knew of old. It put me on my guard. But perhaps I was being unfair. If my brother was genuinely anxious to bridge the gap between us, it was only natural that he should want to "talk to me."

"Whenever you like," I replied.

Aunt Louise had overheard. She said, "Drink up your tea, Hélène. I'll take you to see the child."

"No!" retorted my sister-in-law with a sharpness which she obviously wished to dull by adding, "I should be afraid of waking him up."

Aunt Louise, frightened at her own temerity, lowered her eyes. "Hullo!" I thought. "Hélène's not completely emancipated yet: but perhaps that will come later."

She went on: "But I'd love you to show me the garden, Aunt, while there's still enough light to see by."

"I shall be only too glad."

They got up. "Are you coming with us, Uncle?" Hélène said.

As soon as we were alone—"Have you been informed of the contents of Grandmamma's Will?" my brother said.

I pretended to be arranging my hair, thus giving myself an excuse for averting my face. I terribly wanted to laugh, more at my illusions than at his maneuvering.

"No, Valentin. You know perfectly well that I was not able to go to Paris for the funeral. In my condition, it was impossible. Still less should I have made the journey to be present at the reading of the Will. In any case, since you did not see me there . . ."

"True enough, but I was wondering whether since then . . ."

"I can tell you all you want to know very briefly, since you seem to be interested. The only intimation I have received concerns a personal legacy. I assume that you know all about that. It is in the form of a life annuity. I fully realized the why and the wherefore of a clause which, I must say, seemed rather strange in view of the fact that I am twenty-seven years of age. It is quite obvious that its intention is that I am to receive my small share, but I am not to be allowed to pass it on to my son. I also realized that between the discovery that I was pregnant, and Granny's death, she had made changes in her Will, or that somebody had made her change them."

"Precisely . . . you speak truer than you know. But go on."

"That is all. I wrote to Jarnaux refusing to accept the legacy."

"You *what?*"

"I mean precisely that. I claim no merit for what I did."

I am a fairly rich woman. I might have taken a different attitude, for many reasons, had I not reflected that living as I mean to live, my son will be even richer. But really—an annuity! . . . Don't leave with the idea that I am surrendering anything else. I am not a saint. Most of what I possess has come to me from Grandpapa, from my godfather, and from Xavier. There are, I know, the two diamonds which Granny gave me . . . all things considered, I have decided to keep them. Xavier was fond of them. He had them set in a ring for me. I expect you recognize them?"

He did not look at the ring, and I put my hands back on my lap. He embarked on a detailed account of the Will, from which I gathered that all Granny's children had been fairly treated, though the bulk of her property had gone to Simon at the expense of certain other more distant relatives. One way and another, my elder brother had been by far the biggest beneficiary.

"Well, that's that," I said. "Have you discussed the matter with him?"

"You had better know, Agnès, that Simon and I are not on the best of terms."

"Oh? Are things as bad as that?"

"You can't imagine the situation. For instance, I suppose you remember that Grandmamma had some Suez shares?"

"No, I was not kept informed in matters of that kind but I'm prepared to take your word for it. And what about Mother? What does she feel about all this?"

"Poor dear, the last thing she wants is to have to take sides between her two sons! Besides, money questions are so little in her line. . . . But *I'm* not going to take it lying down!

After all, I have a wife and children dependent on me. . . . We know, now, that during the last months of Grandmamma's life Simon was often alone with her. Just the two of them. Oh, *he* knew well enough how to make the best of those private talks! He could amuse and distract her—he knew how! But that wasn't what he was after. Oh no! What he did was to get her to redraft her Will from beginning to end! I questioned Francisca about the whole business—though she didn't realize that that was what I was doing—and from her I got all the details I needed. . . . Do you follow me?"

"Yes, indeed; go on. But matters of this sort are a bit strange to me. You were saying?"

"I was saying that, for one thing—and the whole family will bear witness to the truth of what I am saying—for a whole year before her death, Grandmamma was not in her right mind. We shan't be far out—*indeed* we shan't—in suggesting undue influence. For another, I'm not the only one who feels done out of his rights. The whole of Uncle Théodore's side of the family is with me—Gaston, Raoul and Geneviève. They're furious. Finally, Agnès, there's you. That ridiculous annuity!"

"Have you been counting on me, Valentin?"

I asked the question without indignation, almost without surprise. My only feeling was one of amused curiosity.

"Of course I have," he said. "There is no need for you to be uneasy. I am not proposing to take the matter to court. That's not the way to go about it. No, we'll just have a word with him. But, for it to be effective—well, you know what Simon's like. We must be determined, and we must have the weight of numbers behind us."

“So you were counting on me! But, Valentin, you can’t really have thought what it would have meant to me to return to Paris solely to make that kind of gesture, and after all that has happened between them and me! . . . What do you think it would look like? If you have come here just to enlist my help, then all I can say is that I am sorry you should have had all this trouble and come all this way for nothing. . . .”

I could see that he had not given up all hope of winning me over, for he proceeded to enlarge on the situation and spoke of other repercussions that the Will would have. All the Boussardels were at loggerheads. Each one of twenty persons directly descended from the old lady had already declared that they were far from satisfied and had formulated the nature of their claims. Even Aunt Emma had not been on speaking terms with her sister Louise—a fact which the latter, out of her goodness of heart, had concealed from me. The reason for the quarrel was that when Emma had asked whether there was any memento of their mother which she would value, Louise had said that it would give her great pleasure to have the Folio La Fontaine.

“But it’s worth an enormous sum!” the elder sister had exclaimed.

Louise had replied that her choice was dictated by reasons not of money but of sentiment. When she was a child, her mother had given her the book to read. But Emma would not listen. She had herself suggested as Louise’s fair portion in the general division a bottle of smelling salts, a chocolate box, and a knickknack of no monetary value. But La Fontaine with the Oudry illustrations and bound in contem-

porary morocco! Why, at public auction it might fetch a huge price!

Much to Emma's surprise, the timid Louise had stuck to her guns. Her determination to get possession of this particular souvenir was no doubt due less to the memory of her mother than of herself at the age of five. For I refuse to believe that Aunt Louise had a hidden reserve of cupidity, and that a mere inherited object was sufficient to cause a flare-up between her and her sister.

She had finally made a suggestion. Let the La Fontaine be valued by an expert, and the sum deducted from her share in the estate. But Granny had stipulated that the whole of the library should go to her eldest son. Emma would not hear of any such departure from the dead woman's expressed wish, of so blatant an injury inflicted upon Théodore who, being extremely ignorant and not at all interested in books, would not have cared two pins. In the long run, Aunt Louise had had to acknowledge defeat.

In order to avoid any repetition of ill-feeling, and after the personal legacies had been dealt with, Aunt Emma had divided the residue into four parts. That was the simplest way out of the difficulty. She started with the porcelain dinner-services. The eldest were to have first choice. Uncle Théodore took the Sèvres, she, the Chinese, and Papa the Limoges. Louise, who was the youngest, had to be content with an appalling set of sham Copenhagen which was unearthed in a cupboard where no one had so much as suspected its existence, except Emma herself.

It was the same with everything else. Furniture, pictures, plate, and even lace—in which the men were not interested

—everything was divided and broken up. A number of small Saxe figures which, separated from the collection of which they formed part, became mere valueless odds and ends, underwent the same fate. A quantity of old photographs was found, all dating from before 1900 and all faded to a dim mauve color, reproductions of museum objects which Grandpapa had once brought back from a foreign trip. These trivial things too were put together, then divided into four parts.

But there were worse discoveries to come. Valentin told me that the opening of a roll-top desk belonging to Granny had revealed a number of surprises. Uncle Théodore and Papa had appropriated several packets of letters in female handwriting and shut themselves away before going through them. Many of them they had burned. What had they discovered, and did their discovery have to do with Grandmamma or Grandpapa? My brother, in spite of his inquisitorial gifts, had not been able to find out. But there was a good deal of talk, for example, about a nurse who had looked after Papa and had been sent packing at short notice by my grandmother.

It was decided that inquiries should be started to find out whether the youngest son of this woman, born after the rest of her family, was still alive. The man in question had at last been traced. He was living out an honorable old age somewhere in the depths of the country, and had produced sons and daughters. The inquiries also revealed that a number of city-gentlemen were still enjoying pensions, the original recipients of which, all female, had long been dead.

Then, after an inventory of the diamonds had been made, there had been a violent quarrel with Aunt Julienne.

"It has all been very unpleasant!" Valentin sighed. "Grand-mamma barely dead and everyone ferreting about, arguing, and quarreling. That is why I am no longer on speaking terms with Simon. . . ."

"Cheer up," I said, "it will all settle itself, and a good deal sooner than you think. As for your rift with Simon, it won't last a month. As for the others . . . it is no more than a passing storm, believe me. At the moment you are all a bit on edge. Granny's death has been a shock. You had never realized that a woman as old as she was could occupy so big a place in your lives. But you will close your ranks. The family dinners will begin again. You'd miss them too much if they didn't. Don't worry, Valentin. Our family is powerful. It will always be powerful."

5.

SEEING the four of them start back again together on the same boat, I was certain that they were not going as announced, one pair to Cannes, the other to Monte Carlo, but that all would return immediately to Paris after this seditious sortie into my camp.

I watched them out of sight in the motor launch, only the lights of which were visible in the darkness. I had tried to keep them all with me for dinner, excusing my inability to put them up for the night in a house of which two rooms out of a total of four were occupied by the baby and his

nurse. But Valentin, after the failure of his mission, seemed unwilling to stay longer; while Aunt Louise, who had believed that the family knew nothing of her plan to visit me, must have felt that there was still too obvious a smack of heresy about Cap Baïou.

In spite of the mistral, in spite of the lateness of the hour, I stood at the far end of the breakwater to see them draw away from me. The swell which, fortunately, was light, made their little vessel roll ever so slightly. My visitors had failed in their mission. I knew that there would be no further attempt, that I should receive no more family wanderers. It was even probable that Aunt Louise and Valentin would keep the story of their mutual adventure secret.

Many different thoughts nagged at me, as often happens after a meeting that has reopened the doors of memory and stirred one's thoughts of a forgotten world. I began to recapitulate, as I had done when I left New York. The two moments had much in common, but this time it was the others who were heading for the open sea, I who was staying behind for good and all in the haven of refuge which I had found for myself. It was scarcely more than a year, and already the wheel had come full circle.

My four relatives were carrying away with them in their launch that youthful Agnès from whom the events of that year had separated me.

They were taking with them, too, the memory of that mother who, for long years, had never ceased to say "Heavens! how plain you are, my poor dear!" and, in the same decisive tone, had declared that I was "impossible to live with." I had believed her, until a day came when a lady

who was calling on her had remarked in my hearing, "You have a most charming little daughter, madame; she will grow up into a beauty." Until that other day when first the college girls of Berkeley, and then Norman, had stated as their opinion that, for a Frenchwoman, I was very easy indeed to live with. Plain . . . impossible to live with . . . who can tell what effect such words heard too often may have upon the mind of a young girl, words that return time and again to her memory, charged on each recurring occasion with more bitterness, more poison? . . .

My mother, who now for the first time stood plainly revealed to me in the light of my own experiences. Brought up among half-brothers and half-sisters, the children of a former marriage; a woman who had married without love, who had shriveled in the presence of a husband on whom she had consciously imposed her frigidity in order to humiliate and punish him; a mother who had regarded me, her daughter, with aversion not because I was plain and impossible to live with but because I was her daughter and in much the same situation as she in earlier days had been, and, therefore, capable of feeling the same agonies as she had felt herself. . . . What I have been through, you shall go through! Was not that fair?

Fair or not, it was in the nature of things. My mother took her place among all mothers the world over who take revenge for their own misfortunes upon their daughters; and those daughters, in turn, will take a similar revenge. This in itself explains the survival, in certain families where the authority of the mother is strong, of so many backward ideas. By what miracle had I been able to escape from this

chain of events? Primarily, of course, through the magic of love. But if, in the last few months, I have never been in danger of finding myself caught up again in that perilous process, has it perhaps been because I have given birth, not to a daughter, but a son?

The lights of the boat by this time had altogether vanished. They had dwindled into the distance and were now indistinguishable from the twinkling lights of the harbors opposite. I had been once more left in solitude. And alone I should remain. The island would henceforward be the frame for my whole life. I could feel it at my back, great primeval mass of soil and vegetation. And in the house, in the nursery I had installed in it, lay the tiny bundle of human flesh which was waiting for me. I got to my feet, impatient to be gone. The play was ended.

But in thinking that, I was wrong. I should have said rather that the curtain was about to be rung up on another, which is not yet over. In it is summed up the mistake I had made in thinking of myself as free. Actually I had done no more than imitate the Trojans. Like them, I had introduced the enemy within the walls and kept him there imprisoned. I fondly thought that I had escaped from the Boussardels, whereas there are now two of them on the island—myself and my son.

I cannot hope to make you see as rational the horror which seized me when I began to notice upon myself the effects of approaching middle age. The years slipped by me in my loneliness. My thirtieth birthday came and went. I was growing old, and old in the true Boussardel manner. I saw the first indications of the family stoutness. Hardly

was I conscious of the threat than the reality was upon me. I fought against it desperately, unceasingly. After a few more years, I began to see a terrifying resemblance between my mother's face and mine. Once people had said the usual things about me—"Which is she going to be like, her father or her mother?"—each giving his own opinion which never pleased me, whatever it was, since I did not want to be like either. I knew, now, whose appearance I had inherited.

Against this, too, I fought by paying endless attention to my body, exercising, dieting. I have been able to check this last attack of my family against my person. I have recovered, or almost, my former figure. I have lost neither my hands nor my features. But my legs! Over them I have wept innumerable tears. The long thighs in which I once delighted, I now conceal, even from myself. . . . You mustn't laugh. No man could ever hope to understand.

But the real drama was being played out elsewhere, close to me.

I was more anxious about my child than about myself. As he grew he became more and more like all the other babies in my family. There is nothing in him to reveal his "foreign" parentage. I have looked vainly for a sign, but no sign has appeared.

I have not, it seems, been able to dilute the maternal blood.

I have fought against this with every weapon I possess. I have turned schoolmarm from necessity, or, rather, from fear. I have been helped by the nurse, whom I have kept on. From her, he has learned how to read English; from me,

French. The place, the climate, have combined to make my task easier. I have tried to set my son's feet firmly on the solid earth, to teach him to know his own strength and his own weakness. I don't mean to say that I have merely reacted against the sort of education which I myself was given, but I have derived light and knowledge from my memories.

Nevertheless, in spite of my efforts I cannot truthfully say that he is in any way a remarkable child. Sometimes I try to lose myself in illusions, and sometimes I see things blacker than they are. But truth obliges me to confess that he is a pretty good example of the Boussardels. I will spare you the details of many small discoveries which prove my point.

So now I have reached the end—and yet not the end at all—of a story in which my family has held the center of the stage; in which nothing of importance has happened to me which has not come from it, by it, within it; in which there is no important character who is not a member of that family, excepting only Norman, and he figures only as a stranger. The end of it all is a small boy who, in his sole and single person, has re-established my family before my eyes.

At fourteen months, when he was cutting his first teeth, he had an attack of bronchitis which rapidly developed into congestion of the lungs. Lungs already! I thought I was going to lose him. In the worst moments of my anxiety, of my exhaustion—for I had lost the ability to sleep—I kept on saying to myself, "The little Boussardel is very ill . . . perhaps the little Boussardel will die."

But he recovered, and no trace of the trouble now remains. The X-rays which I have scrupulously had taken at regular intervals are reassuring. Nevertheless, I still feel

alarmed sometimes when I am in a gloomy mood. I see the ghost of our family weakness hanging over his bed. When he sleeps, or sits, on my lap and lays his head in the hollow of my shoulder, I press him to me with a rush of sadness and cannot help wondering whether he is not really Xavier's son.

✦

With these words Agnès Boussardel rose from her chair, excused herself on the ground of some domestic task awaiting her, and stood motionless. I left her.

I could imagine what this narrative, extending over several days, must have cost in the telling. Now she wanted to be alone with herself. But I hoped that after a day or two we should meet again. This woman, who at first had at-

tracted me because of the air of mystery that hung about her, had made me even more her slave by dissipating it. I had looked forward to making her my friend.

But the next few days were to disabuse me. Agnès Bous-sardel kept me at a distance. She would call her son to her, but never let me see him. I gave orders that a Roman amphora—a fisherman told me that he had brought it up in his net, and it seemed to me to be genuine—should be sent to her filled with flowers. I had bought it for her, and she sent me a brief note of thanks.

I respected her solitude. I had myself come to the island to get away from things, and had resumed my habits—my walks, my sun-bathing—which I enjoyed in a cove lying between two spurs of red sandstone, which could be approached only from the sea. This refuge had become my private beach, for I could reach the water along a path which led nowhere else. The house which Xavier had had painted red stood on a terrace at the other extremity of the cove, far enough away for me to take this route without fear of intruding on her privacy.

Each morning when I went there I saw Agnès Boussardel sitting in a deck chair on the sands, either reading or knitting. She seemed just a mother, nothing but a mother, sitting there like that and keeping a watchful eye upon her son as he played, naked, in the shallows or among the rocks.

After some days had passed, and my discretion had become established, she took to returning the wave of the hand which I gave to her on my way down the path. But that was the full extent of our intimacy.

On one occasion I exchanged a few words with the boy. He was looking for sea urchins at the edge of my cove and, seeing me swim around the Point where he was engaged in his search, said good morning to me in a perfectly natural manner and then said that he was a better swimmer than I was. I agreed that that might well be so, and complimented him upon his skill. Curiosity awoke in me. I hoisted myself onto a rock, and we went on with our talk. It seemed to me that his mother was being difficult, but at least she had brought up her son to be free. He showed his independence by the way in which he answered me, and his manner of taking the initiative in asking questions. There was, in him, that close contact between word and thought that one finds in English children, but also a physical shamelessness and a mental agility which is alien to them. He was getting his second teeth, and their unevenness, when he opened his mouth, gave an added note of the comic to what he said.

But I did not see him again. His mother may, perhaps, have told him not to talk to a stranger, or he may have decided for himself that I was not particularly interesting. I don't know.

One morning, as I lay exposed to the heat of the sun between the sea and my rocks, I was awakened from my state of torpor by a loud cry. I sat up. The cry was repeated, and I thought I recognized the voice of Agnès Boussardel. What had happened? Had there been an accident? Was the boy in danger? The sheer walls of the cove isolated me. I plunged into the sea. A few strokes brought me within sight

of the beach. The child was busy in a pool, and was taking no notice of his mother. It was to me she was calling, for me that her cry had been intended. As I came in sight, she ran toward me.

I began to wade ashore. She had already covered a considerable distance, and I hastened to meet her. She was running heavily, but fast, with one arm stretched across her breast. With the other hand she was holding, for me to see, some object the nature of which I could not make out. Her hair, which she kept long, streamed behind her. There was a pool between us. Of this she took no notice, but went straight through it. The splash she made glittered in the sunlight.

Though I was almost naked, she flung herself panting on my chest and clung to my shoulders. I could feel her breasts crushed against my body. She was too much out of breath to say anything. She showed me what it was that she was holding—a bitten apple. At last she stammered out a few disjointed words:

"I had to . . . to . . . tell somebody . . . especially . . . you . . ."

The perspiration was running down her face. She was shaken with sobs. She stood there in the sunlight, laughing and crying. She went on:

"He was eating his apple . . . he called to me to look at some creature, a shellfish he was trying to catch. . . . He said, 'Hold my apple for me.' His first teeth hadn't shown anything, but now that the others are coming. . . . Look!"

She held the fruit close to my eyes. In the white pulp of

the apple were the marks of the two incisors, with, between them, a tiny gap.

"He has it!" she cried.

She looked up at the sun's blazing ball, and pressed the apple rapturously to her lips. She kissed the marks made by the teeth, and sucked the juice.

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